

The Rev. Christopher Bishop
2nd Advent 2011, Sunday, Dec. 4, 2011
St. Martin's Church, Radnor PA

Penn State

Last week, I was standing out back in the Gurley Room to say a prayer before the service and one of the members of our choir, asked me, “Hey, are you gonna say something about Penn St., the football scandal? And I said “Well, we have this lectionary, and the subject didn’t really come up this Sunday. But wait.” So imagine my surprise when I read both our Ezekiel and Gospel readings this week. Lost sheep, goats, betrayal, accountability and perhaps something about what God has to say about this sort of tragedy.

For those who may not be familiar with this story, it is alleged that a popular and successful assistant coach sexually abused boys at the university over a number of years. In 2002, another assistant witnessed one such assault on a 10 year old boy, and the next day the powerful and respected head coach Joe Paterno was told. No one stopped the assault, and nobody called the police, but rather passed the information along to the university administration.

Apparently the university—from the assistant coach, to the head coach, to the athletic director to the president, the ultimate authority in that world— determined that it was not in their interest to pursue legal action on a violent, awful crime committed against a child. Not in their interest, to protect these children. The alleged rapist was merely told that he could no longer bring children to the university, to shower with them. In the wake of this wrenching scandal, the immensely popular football coach Joe Paterno was fired, and there was rioting by students in his support. “Why scapegoat him? They ask, “He told his superiors.” The university, and crime witness were the ones who did nothing!” And so it goes. And the result is a general sense of shock, sadness, anger and betrayal by students, faculty, football fans, on-lookers alike. And gravely injured children.

Let us begin with a hope: that once the passions and reactivity has passed, that we can all recognize that fundamentally, this is not about football. Or a university, or an athletic program. It’s about a little boy, maybe many little boys, who were coerced, brutalized and degraded by a person in authority, abetted by an institution with priorities other than their protection. A little boy who then watched the popular perpetrator continue to move and act with impunity, with no consequences. Insult to injury just doesn’t describe it.

Now we are a people, perhaps sadly, all too aware of the scourge of child sexual abuse. We know it is demeaning, devastating, and destructive, to the lives of children. As a priest I hear confessions, which I am not permitted to speak of with anyone. If you confess to me that you murdered someone I can't tell anybody. But if you confess to abusing a child, I am mandated by law to report it. It is rightly considered the massacre of a soul, a crime even more egregious than death. So this is not about football. And now that the legal system is engaged, let us see that justice will be served. But what the story of Penn State and this awful circumstance is fundamentally about, has to be about, is us. How we as a community, as a people, as a nation, hold our children as a abroad category of humanity wholly dependent upon us. The way we treat them as our most vulnerable people.

Cue Ezekiel. We must recall that prophets are vested to call God's errant people back into right relationship with God, through the words of God. Often speaking to smug and self-satisfied people's. And God is almost always angry for the same reason: because of the way the rich are treating the poor, and how the powerful are abusing the helpless. Always. Sheep, here and elsewhere, are a defining symbol of humanity, and the shepherd of God's protection and love. Ezekiel prophesies of God: "I myself will search for my sheep... I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness." One can imagine, being a little boy being assaulted in a shower, that that was a day of clouds and thick darkness. Rescue would have been holy. And the question the prophecy suggests is simply this: How will God search for his sheep, his lost ones, his weak ones? How? Who or what will be the vehicle for God's righteousness in protecting the innocent as a huge and overriding concern?

The size of the question is framed today by Jesus in nothing less than a picture of judgment day when, as far as we know, all are held to account. It appears that some will be judged sheep, good, others goats, bad. Maybe so. But Jesus is facing his own death, and what does he choose to speak of? Himself? No. His own goodness? No. Theology? No. He speaks directly and specifically to what is most important and closest to his, to God's very heart: "... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...." He speaks about lovingness. As Christians, as a church, we pray and seek to discern God's will for us, but Jesus is pretty clear.

No kidding, what would God have us do? Feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the forgotten.

And we do this because human beings, particularly the weak, are for us as Jesus is. The full and precious creation of God. “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Members of Jesus’ family. That’s us.

Which brings us back to Penn State. And believe me I have heard every opinion from “string the whole corrupt, rotten lot of them up” to “Joe Paterno is a football and academic saint at Penn State, who did what he thought he needed to do.” I will leave all these men’s consciences to themselves, and let the law follow its course. But all of that is secondary, and distant, and will pass. What this is *really* about are vulnerable and devastated children, betrayed and abandoned among us. Perhaps the most disturbing element in this whole sordid mess, from my standpoint, is who these little boys were, and how this man had such apparently unfettered access to them. They were participants in a program the alleged perpetrator started to assist troubled and often abandoned youth. Boys without fathers. Truly, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. The utter viciousness of what is alleged boggles, rightly, the mind.

But it would be too easy for us to simply identify the bogeymen, the goats, whoever we conceive them to be, and be witness to just another human tragedy. That would be a mistake. Instead, we can focus on where it can provide a way forward that is alive in the spirit, rather than cynical and disgusted by the human capacity to harm. Let us put the focus where God would have it. The only place where there is power for us, and the capacity to transform the life we share. And that focus is us. The one in the mirror. Who are we, and what are we gonna do about it?

What are we going to do about the following: That there are 1.5 million homeless children among us each year routinely vulnerable to abuse. 90,000 cases of child sexual abuse *reported* each year. That 67% of all victims of sexual assault reported are juveniles under the age of 18. That 34% of all victims were under age 12. That one of every seven victims is under 6.

Remember, this is in God’s world, and we are God’s children, some of the ones who choose how its gonna go. So, how’s it gonna go with us? Yes, we can just bemoan the cruelty out there, and consider the perpetrator of these outrages as just the goat that Jesus speaks of, deserving of the outer darkness. And we can speak of those children as sheep, in need of God’s protection. And maybe we’re sheep. But maybe that’s too easy. Our culture’s treatment of

children—particularly, those most at risk, is a national disgrace. We participate in a media culture that sexualizes children, we ignore children in dire living conditions, we allow 22% of children, 1 in 5, to live below the poverty level. We allow substandard schools and resources for children born in the wrong places, we tolerate things outrage all the time.

There's only one problem. Those children out there? That's Jesus. That abused child living on the street without anyone to care for her? Jesus. That little boy in the shower at Penn State, alone, terrified and violated? Jesus. We hear it right in our Gospel. And we hear these words of profound, penetrating compassion as we venerate and celebrate the power of Christ the King, God alive and known among us today. Because God's power is compassion, that power which we are entrusted to enact in the world.

In the end, there will be another football season. And we are going to be how we are going to be about Joe Paterno. The attacker. The witness. The university. But let's keep our focus where it needs to be. And certainly, let justice flow down like water on behalf of those boys, who deserved to be cared for, encouraged and protected by all of the adults to whom they were entrusted, as all children do. It's uncanny, hear Ezekiel, speaking to us across time, "I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. *I will feed them with justice.*"

But for us this is more than a political, or moral football so to speak. We can see this incident as a call to look within. To take responsibility. To remember that Jesus is the chord that binds our two great commandments together as one. When we are loving one another, particularly the weak, the vulnerable, the lost, we are loving God. And this is a gift and a blessing. When we're not, we need to take a look and dig deeper.

In the name of the one God, protector of children and all those in need of love and care in the world, Amen.