

Scripture Study

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A



Opening prayer

Ezekiel 33:7-9

(Ps 95:1-2,6-9)

Romans 13:8-10

Matthew 18:15-20

Overview of the Gospel:

- Since last Sunday's gospel (Matthew 16:21-27), the readings have skipped over Matthew, chapter 17, which included an account of Jesus' Transfiguration (verses 1-8) and a second prediction of his Passion (verses 22-23).
- In the present chapter, Jesus is questioned by his disciples about the nature of the kingdom of heaven (verse 1). After warnings against seeking after rank or importance rather than humility (verses 1-5) and being a source of scandal to those who are the object of God's loving concern (verses 6-14), Jesus sets forth a process for dealing with conflict and disagreements within the Church.
- The Greek word (*elegxon*) translated as "tell him his fault" in the New American Bible (verse 15) has the meaning "to rebuke in order to expose sin and bring correction." Thus, it is to be a *fraternal* correction, for the good of the person. It is also private to avoid scandal and to protect the good name of the innocent.
- Failing that, two witnesses are brought in (per Deuteronomy 19:15-16) with the hope the influence of good friends or respected persons may have an effect. As a last resort (verse 17) judicial correction (i.e. excommunication) may be made by reference to the Church authorities. As in verse 15, this is not a means of punishment, but of fraternal correction.
- Jesus makes it plain (here and in Matthew 16:18) that he has given the leaders of his Church authority to make decisions in these matters that are ratified by God (verse 18).

Questions:

- According to the 1st Reading, what is our responsibility toward those who we see endangering themselves by their own sinful actions? According to the 2nd Reading, what should be our spirit and approach when we find ourselves in this position?
- How does the Gospel passage reconcile with Matthew 7:3-5? How does it *complement* Matthew 16:13-20? What is the connection between verse 18 and the priestly power to forgive sins?
- The reconciliation process described by Jesus involves what three stages? Why not go public right away? What authority is given to the followers of Jesus? To the leadership of the Church (see John 20:21-23)?
- What does this passage say about the counsel of others? Of accountability to legitimate authority?
- How do you handle disagreements or wrongs done to you by others, especially by family? What pattern do you follow? How close to the model presented in this passage is your method of handling problems?

Catechism of the Catholic Church: §§ 1088, 1373, 1444-1445

Closing prayer

Lord, in my zeal for the love of truth, let me not forget the truth about love. - St. Thomas Aquinas

Remember to read and meditate on the daily Mass readings!

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault"

Scripture: *Matthew 18:15-20*

Meditation: What's the best way to repair a damaged relationship? Jesus offers his disciples spiritual freedom and power for restoring broken or injured relationships. Jesus makes clear that his followers should not tolerate a breach in relationships among themselves. Sin must be confronted and help must be offered to restore a damaged relationship. When relationships between brothers and sisters in the Lord are damaged, then we must spare no effort to help the brother or sister at fault to see their error and to get things right again.

Saint Augustine of Hippo comments on Jesus' instruction:

If someone has done you injury and you have suffered, what should be done? You have heard the answer already in today's scripture: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." If you fail to do so, you are worse than he is. He has done someone harm, and by doing harm he has stricken himself with a grievous wound. Will you then completely disregard your brother's wound? Will you simply watch him stumble and fall down? Will you disregard his predicament? If so, you are worse in your silence than he in his abuse. Therefore, when any one sins against us, let us take great care, but not merely for ourselves. For it is a glorious thing to forget injuries. Just set aside your own injury, but do not neglect your brother's wound. Therefore "go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone," intent upon his amendment but sparing his



sense of shame. For it might happen that through defensiveness he will begin to justify his sin, and so you will have inadvertently nudged him still closer toward the very behavior you desire to amend. Therefore "tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother," because he might have been lost, had you not spoken with him. [Sermon 82.7]

What can we learn from this passage about how to mend a damaged relationship? If you feel you have been wronged by someone, Jesus says the first step is to speak directly but privately to the individual who has done the harm. One of the worst things we can do is brood over our grievance. This can poison the mind and heart and make it more difficult to go directly to the person who caused the damage. If we truly want to settle a difference between someone, we need to do it face to face. If this fails in its purpose, then the second step is to bring another person or persons, someone who is wise and gracious rather than someone who is hot-tempered or judgmental. The goal is not so much to put the offender on trial, but to persuade the offender to see the wrong and to be reconciled. And if this fails, then we must still not give up, but seek the help of the Christian

community. Note the emphasis here is on restoring a broken relationship by seeking the help of other Christians who hopefully will pray and seek a solution for reconciliation based on Christian love and wisdom, rather than relying on coercive force or threat of legal action, such as a lawsuit.

Lastly, if even the Christian community fails to bring about reconciliation, what must we do? Jesus seems to say that we have the right to abandon stubborn and obdurate offenders and treat them like social outcasts. The tax-collectors and Gentiles were regarded as "unclean" by the religious-minded Jews. However we know from the gospel accounts that Jesus often had fellowship with tax-collectors, ate with them, and even praised them at times! Jesus refuses no one who is ready to receive pardon, healing, and restoration. The call to accountability is inevitable and we can't escape it, both in this life and at the day of judgment when the Lord Jesus will return. But while we have the opportunity, we must not give up on stubborn offenders, but, instead make every effort to win them with the grace and power of God's healing love and wisdom. Do you tolerate broken relationships or do you seek to repair them as God gives you the opportunity to mend and restore what is broken?

"Lord, make me an instrument of your healing love and peace. Give me wisdom and courage to bring your healing love and saving truth to those in need of healing and restoration."

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