

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time - Lectionary: 127

Reading 1 - [EZ 33:7-9](#)

Thus says the LORD: You, son of man, I have appointed watchman for the house of Israel; when you hear me say anything, you shall warn them for me. If I tell the wicked, “O wicked one, you shall surely die,” and you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from his way, the wicked shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death. But if you warn the wicked, trying to turn him from his way, and he refuses to turn from his way, he shall die for his guilt, but you shall save yourself.

Responsorial Psalm - [PS 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9](#) - R. (8) If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Reading 2 - [ROM 13:8-10](#)

Brothers and sisters: Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this saying, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.

Gospel - [MT 18:15-20](#)

Jesus said to his disciples: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, amen, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

Reflecting on all the readings and the Psalm for this weekend we see the importance listening to God, being transformed through faithful relationship with God and how to live together as sinners becoming saints. This is an essential theme running through the readings which, in particular, highlights our responsibility as disciples of Christ for other disciples in particular and for people in the broader world around us.

The whole of Matthew chapter 18, where the Gospel for today is found, is a discourse on mutual relations within the Christian community. With divine and human understanding, in the Gospel passage of today, which is situated in the middle of chapter 18, Jesus deals especially with what to do when divisions arise within the Christian community. He gives us the model for dealing with situations that will inevitably arise due to original sin and concupiscence. The passage focuses on the nature of a disciples love for another member of the community who has sinned against them, and the way in which the matter ought to be resolved. Christ is giving us a very high bar, which we will consistently fail to achieve without prayer, humility and grace. As the Psalmist says, "if today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts".

Matthew's discourse on community discipline, as chapter 18 is often designated, describes for us the foundational values and practices that distinguish the community of disciples from any other group. We see the importance of solidarity with one another as "children" (Matthew 18:1-5) which gives reason for the avoidance of actions that cause others to "stumble" (18:6-9). We see how a community of disciples who live in the imitation of Christ ought to care for the most vulnerable just as he did (18:6, 10, 14) and seek the healing and restoration of those who go astray (18:12-14, 15-17). Our human brokenness will always lead to questions of how much must I love and how often must I forgive, and we taught that just as God forgives without limit (18:21-35) so too are we called to do the same and so to love in a way that knows no bounds. In the pursuit of this vision and these practices, the community comes to embody and represent heaven on earth (18:18-19) and Jesus himself is present among us (18:20).

Scripture, being the divinely inspired and inerrant Word of God, gives us the parable of the lost sheep, in chapter 18, immediately before the section of today's Gospel reading. His instructions on how the community should handle situations of interpersonal sin and conflict emphasizes restoring someone who has gone astray and highlights the joy in heaven and on earth when a soul is saved. This sets us on the path of love in our further reflections on the readings.

St. Paul helps us to understand better the kind of love that must underly the way in which we interact with each other. When love undergirds and encompasses our relationships, then when the moment comes for us to share a corrective word from God such as in the first reading or when we are faced with the challenge of fraternal correction such as in the Gospel reading – we will ensure that we are 'in Christ' as we hold others accountable or they hold us accountable and as we or they seek to restore the relationships between the rebel, the community and God. As St. Paul said, love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbor, which is why it is the answer to every one of the commandments.

If I am to be authentically able to love my neighbor as well as to love my brother or sister in Christ, especially in the challenging moments that involve correction, then I must accept the responsibility of that love. Accepting that responsibility will mean that I must immerse myself in God's mercifully reconciling love for me in order to grow in the virtues of faith, hope, charity, prudence, justice, fortitude – so to be able to rise to the challenge of today's Gospel passage.

In particular we should consider this responsibility of love, within the context of engaging in the spiritual works of mercy. In fact, if we are being like Christ in a valid moment of necessary fraternal correction of someone who has sinned against us, we discover that at least four of the seven spiritual works of mercy will be accomplished and quite possibly more. As a reminder, the seven spiritual works of mercy are: admonish the sinner, instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, comfort the sorrowful, bear wrong patiently, forgive all injuries and pray for the living and the dead.

Prayer must also be at the beginning of this process. In this case we are praying for the living. After the sin has been committed we ought to intercede on behalf of that person for that which God alone knows they need, continue to pray that they God will help them to be prepared to receive the correction we must offer and finally to pray for their healing as well as our own. Having prayed as we ought, we will experience peace of a kind which opens us to forgiveness and enables patience. Such as we pray to our Father when we say 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. As we recognize the work of God preparing us through these spiritual mercies, for the challenge ahead, we become deeply aware of God's grace leading us in prayer and moving us to love. With a true disposition of forgiveness of all injuries we can move forward.

In order to accomplish fraternal correction in the manner of Christ, it will be necessary to be willing to bear the wrong committed against you, with patience. This will be difficult for most of us and may even run contrary to our own sinful inclinations and human weaknesses. It will require prayer and God's grace so as to be able to readily draw upon the above-mentioned virtues along with various gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as wisdom, fortitude, counsel and piety.

When so prepared by praying and experiencing the fruits of prayer such as a forgiving heart and patient love, we are more able to then admonish the sinner in a way that they are able to receive the correction if they have not hardened their heart toward us or God. Often, if the one who sinned against us is open to repentance, conversion and reconciliation, we will have an opportunity to instruct the ignorant. We all know, that although a person might be guilty of the sin, they may be ignorant of their actions as sinful.

If the encounter remains more discreet in nature or it becomes necessary to involve others, everyone involved must be of the same mind and engage in the encounter in the same way as described above. In the end if the person remains obstinate in their sin then a rightful judgement can be made against that person, binding them to the sin and the consequence. If the person repents or is found to be innocent, then a rightful judgement can be made that results in loosing them from the sin, although even if found guilty and repentant, consequences may still ensue.

Such justly made judgements will be honored by God. “Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven...” These words indicate that the community has the power, given it by God, to make a judgement on who is fit to belong to the Body of Christ. It is a necessary power to preserve the integrity of the community as a witness to the Gospel.

The Jews, upon hearing Jesus speak and later reading Matthew’s gospel, would have immediately known that this passage dealt with what we now call, church discipline. The passage would have reminded them of passages in Deuteronomy, concerning the law. Deuteronomy 17 and 19 speak of 2 or 3 witnesses gathered to testify in court. The witnesses were necessary to establish a case in court. *“Evidence of two or three witnesses follows the guideline in Deut. 19:15 and refers to witnesses of the subsequent confrontation described in this verse, not necessarily eyewitnesses to the original offense.”* And 18:20, *“Jesus affirms that he will be divinely present among his disciples as they seek unity in rendering decisions, which is rightly understood also as an affirmation of omnipresence and therefore of deity.”*

Unfortunately, at times, in part because of our own concupiscence which cause us to find the way of Christ to be enormously difficult, we need to be corrected and we need divine instruction on how to do it. It can be so difficult in fact, that even a disciple of Christ who has a generally willing heart, will often shrink from giving or receiving fraternal correction. In so doing, we suffer even greater wounds and very frequently, having given in to the enemy, we find ourselves committing sin. One of the most frequent sins, born of our emotional woundedness is, gossip. When a Christian is guilty of gossip about someone’s sinful behavior, it is an act borne of cowardice. It is especially grievous when the one gossiping is also the one who ought to be offering charitable correction and guidance to the person who has sinned against them. When it comes to the strength of our faithfulness, even when facing the most difficult challenges of life in Christ, holding to the Truth and being uncompromising in following his way... we must be resolved toward holiness and cede no part of our soul to the enemy.

As I mentioned at the beginning, being in relationship with others, as Christians, our relationships must necessarily be rooted in love. It is the love that binds the Trinity in unity and is therefore the love that will bind in unity the mystical Body of Christ. So, let’s spend a little time considering the nature of this love and communion. We have come to know that the teaching of the Gospel today focuses on how we are indeed responsible for our brothers and sisters when they sin against us. This love in action, is an agape type of love, rather than the broad philia type of love. Agape is of course related, but it is more specific and complete. It is the kind of love the children of God ought to have for each other, such as the love between the Father and the Son, which begets the Holy Spirit. That is not to say that our love of neighbor ought to be limited to ‘philia’, but that our love for the children of God ought to be of the highest order, always, and never less.

That love of the highest order, is self-emptying, sacrificial love that Jesus demonstrated on the cross for all of our sins. So then, we too must have charity in our hearts for our brothers and sisters, especially when it comes to the path of salvation. This goes beyond the necessary desire for the good that one ought to have for all people. It means that we are to desire the good and

to offer sacrifice in order that that good should be attained by the other person. This is essential to unity in the Church.

Community is vital as God's gift and the very setting within which God moves among us. It is a community, as we know too well, that has to be preserved, protected from bitter rancor and pointless dissension. We are reminded today that to belong to the Church is to belong to a community of brothers and sisters in Christ. As well, that our relationship with God-Father, Son and Holy Spirit, depends intimately on how we relate with other people – "By this will all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35) and "As often as you did/did not do it to the very least of my brothers and sisters, you did/did not do it to me" (Matthew 25:40,45). This means that being a Christian is not a private, purely personal affair. We are a community of members of the mystical body of Christ who cannot be purely self-reliant or God-reliant, but also necessarily reliant upon each other, for the common good / the good of the whole body.

Keep in mind that the Church was in its infancy when Matthew was writing to his Jewish/Christian community. We don't know the exact date when the Gospel was written, but we are assured that it was after 55 ad and probably before the fall of the temple in 70 ad. It is all the more encouraging and wonder-full, that Christ spoke the words of this passage in the 18th chapter of Matthews Gospel. Since, the Church had not yet been founded. By this we mean of course the Church that is the body of believers bound by faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ, formed by the water and blood from His side and brought to life by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So, for Jesus, this was a future reality that for Matthew and the community of believers became of great importance and has never ceased to be of the greatest importance to the Church which Christ founded.

In our hyper individualistic culture, it is easy to mistakenly think that being a Catholic mostly means being concerned with the relationship between God and myself. It should be noted, especially for Catholics, that although many of the sister churches formed by our separated brethren are very good at building community among themselves, they are also very individualistic about their relationship with God. This is completely contrary to Hebrew tradition and to Catholic tradition. Catholics are well advised to overcome this mindset that has become pervasive in predominantly protestant influenced cultures. With further study a person would discover a number of other errors which rise from this reduction of relationship with God, to the individual.

In fact, the path of salvation and our call to holiness must include becoming a truly loving and caring person as part of a loving and caring community of people united in Christ, as one. And so, we can better understand that, when sinned against, agape love necessarily involves bringing the brother or sister face to face with the loving demands of the Gospel, a call to repentance, conversion and reconciliation. This is for the good of the other, and the good of the whole body of the Church. Since the reality of Christian community, especially as it relates to the Church as mystical Body of Christ, it is important that we reflect on this so as to 'round out' our understanding of the readings today.