

47 Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A September 6 2020
Ezekiel 33:7-9 Psalm 93 Romans 13:8-10 Matthew 18:15-20

In today's Gospel, Jesus addresses not forgiveness *but* the sin committed by one member of the community. Jesus says every effort is to be made to bring the person to repentance in private, and then if the person does not repent then take one or two people. If the person still refuses to repent, then "*tell it to the church.*" Jesus says that the decision of the Church will "*bind on earth will be bound in heaven.*"

According to tradition, Matthew's Gospel was most likely written for a small Jewish community living in Israel in the years after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. Having lost their national and spiritual capital, the Jewish nation had become increasingly suspicious of anything that threatened its unity and faith, if not its very existence. It became clear that if the Catholic community was to flourish, it needed to be united and mutually supportive in the face of all tensions, internal or external. Therefore, forgiveness for those who weakened or broke the bonds of community quickly became a central concern for the early Church.

The offering of forgiveness to a sister or a brother is a very real way of taking up one's cross, which has been the challenge of the Gospel for the last two Sundays. Jesus says to His disciples, "*If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.*" He doesn't say, "*Put up with it, suffer it, endure it.*" He says, "*Go and confront him or her with his or her wrongdoing.*" Today's Gospel Reading, although very sensitive and extremely hard to practice, gives us some insight on how we can become more loving with our brothers and sisters who sin against us. Jesus gives us practical lessons on a way of tackling a problem like this.

Jesus' challenge of *fraternal correction* is probably one of the most difficult to live out and yet it is vital in our faith. It goes without saying that corrections of offending acts by our brothers and sisters are seldom welcomed and those who need it most always like it least. Correction is never easy and can be embarrassing as it may carry with it the risk of losing a long established friendship. People are sensitive to correction, and rightly so, if it is not done in charity and if it is not done tactfully.

In today's Gospel Jesus provides guidelines for how His followers are to love one another. Jesus encourages us to be open and honest with each other and to be

attentive when someone sins against us or against the community. Being honest with a person when we know he or she has sinned is a way of showing respect to that person, a way of bringing peace and a way of living the message of the Gospel.

No person is an island and in Christ we are all brothers and sisters and members of the one family of God. Life is short and we all have to take seriously the responsibility of helping those who are weak or in need of our assistance. Jesus' words carry a very clear message concerning our responsibility towards the salvation of others within the community.

To carry out this responsibility does not mean we are to be prying busybodies and interfering in people's lives. Yet, Jesus teaches us to go to the person who is sinning and talk it over. Some people find it much easier to simply cut someone off rather than become involved in correcting their offending acts.

Instead of facing the person who should be confronted in charity, many people are tempted to discuss the matter in uncharitable gossip, criticism, backbiting, or name-calling. St. James, in his letter, writes: *"Consider how small a fire can set a huge forest ablaze. The tongue is also a fire"* (3:6).

When someone goes around telling others about the wrong that was done by another person, this achieves nothing, except to spread the poisonous sins of hatred, anger, and lies. Instead of drawing back the offender to Christ, to the Church, and to the community, the gap has now become widened. The return of the sinner has been made more difficult. We should never correct out of anger, or with the desire to punish.

Love is the one way that cannot hurt the offender. If we have the ability to convey a genuine concern, a little honest talking in charity can often clear the air and restore our relationship with the person. In the Second Reading, St. Paul stresses that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. This love is above the Law. Regardless of our feelings for others, we are to love them, to help whenever we can, to build them up rather than tear them down.

This is the love we are commanded to live. The love that Jesus commands, and that Jesus lives, is not a set of warm or fuzzy feelings. We are asked to will, to want, to seek, to make happen, the good of those God puts around us. This not always easy, and it is not always pleasant.

With people we love, that may be easier to do. With those we do not love, it can be very difficult. It is worth remembering that not one of us is perfect, so when we point out the faults of another person, we should do so with love, with kindness, and with gentleness. Harsh words and an aggressive attitude have no place in our Catholic community.

As members of the Body of Christ, love of our neighbor includes responsibility for each other. We are not being loving if we fail to call others away from sin or fail to offer guidance to someone seeking to be free of sin. If we are only concerned about our own spiritual lives, we deny our unity with others in the Body of Christ. If we are living only for our own material satisfaction, we restrict Christ from working in and through us. We inflict upon our own souls the sins of omission and neglect to our brothers and sisters who are sinning.

If the wrongdoer is deaf to the words of your initial approach, the proper response is neither exasperation nor resignation. Instead, filled with a desire for reconciliation, the Catholic must persevere and if necessary, enlist the help of another and if necessary, enlist the help of the Church.

Whether the approach is made alone or with others or with the Church, it must all be part of prayer in action. Whoever has to correct another should pray beforehand for the light of truth, for courage of heart and for the tactful gentleness which will heal rather than wound, draw back rather than withdraw, and fan the flame of hope rather than the fire of bitterness. In our prayer to correct an offending person, the positive act of charity would be to ask ourselves first, *“What would Jesus do?”* As you pray, reflect on this: *“If I believe someone is at fault, how do I try to work it out with the person?”* It is very important when we are seeking the prayers of others that we do not breach confidentiality by releasing the person’s name or the nature of the sin.

Our family and friends are precious special gifts from God. Community can be formed only when we help each other, when we love each other. The point of today’s Gospel reading is that Catholic love is not a feeling or an emotion but a responsibility. We show that responsibility by speaking the truth to them. The greatest harm we can do to people when they face spiritual danger is to do nothing and just look the other way.

Yes, reconciliation with a person can happen and it can lead to a greater growth in our community. We must be willing to challenge others, calling them to be holy people. In this way, we work together by leading and guiding each other to the kingdom of heaven.

It is Jesus Himself who emphasizes the importance of being reconciled with our brothers and sisters. God created us to live in unity with Him and with each other. Let us pray for the grace to serve one another in love, knowing that such service gives joy to our Heavenly Father's heart.