

090708 23rd Sunday In OT

Peace be with you....

Let me start with a link between the first reading and the Gospel – Ezekiel is appointed watchman over the house of Israel – the chosen people of God. That is part of what that first reading is about. And just so, in today's Gospel, Jesus establishes his disciples as guardians of the new Israel of God, the Church. If you aren't used to this concept of the Church as the new Israel, please look at Galatians 6:16. And so, in our faith and life journey, we are not alone – we have the Church.

Jesus also puts into place procedures for dealing with sin and breaches of the faith... breaches of relationships. This is built on discipline prescribed by Moses for Israel. And now, we are given a roadmap to healing in the community of believers. In the most serious of matters, the Apostles (and of course, their successors) are given the power to bind and loose, to forgive sins and to reconcile sinners in His name.

First, let's take an example from our personal lives. Somebody says or does something that hurts us. How do we react to that? It's very tempting to begin to feel sorry for ourselves, or angry. Before long our self-pity needs to be expressed. We begin to tell others about the issue as well. We become dismayed when that doesn't make us feel better. We can continue to harbor our resentment for a long time.

In today's Gospel we're called to go to someone who has hurt us, to keep the fault between the two of us. If we muster the courage to do that we'll often find that no offense was meant. Reconciliation can quickly happen and we can feel at peace almost immediately. But, sometimes it's not so simple. There doesn't seem to be an openness on the other side to consider the harm that was done. The other person might not regret their words or actions at all.

Then we're called to involve another. That might be a mutual friend. It might be someone who has expertise in the area where we have been hurt. Our insistence on understanding and reconciliation may move the heart of the one who did the hurting. Sometimes that's all it takes to bring about the reconciliation we'd like so much to have.

There is a lady named Shirley back in Colorado. She said to me one time that she almost chokes on the words in the Lord's Prayer... 'as we forgive those who trespass against us.' For Shirley – and perhaps for some of you – if you have relationships that are horribly fractures – the Gospel suggests we talk to the Church.... go to reconciliation – the Sacrament of Confession. As for guidance and ideas. Perhaps that will help open a new door.

If not, we're called to treat the one who hurt us as a Gentile or a tax collector. God doesn't want us to be a door mat. We can protect ourselves from greater harm by detaching ourselves from the person causing the harm. We can continue to pray for them. We can wish them the very best.

Still, there are times when it is best not to spend a lot of time with them. An example in this area is when you have been hurt or abused by someone suffering from addiction. At some point, you must come to a point of tough love. Don't enable or coddle such treatment.

That's how we're called to deal with hurt and conflict. In this weekend's first reading we hear of our responsibility to speak with others about their wrongdoing. When we don't do so, we're guilty as well. If we do our best to help them resolve the issue and it doesn't work, then we can become more detached knowing that only their guilt remains. We've done our part.

Now here is a real world experience of this from the Church. I recently shared this with Fr. Tom D as an experience I was involved with. I can't go into too much detail – but here is enough information so you'll be able to understand what happened. At the parish I left back in Colorado, we had a husband and wife team who were very involved in the Church. Among other things, they led a certain study ministry. It happened they had a belief that was inconsistent with the teaching of the Church – and they espoused – they exhorted others to come to that same incorrect belief. Our pastor found out about this. He went to the couple and talked to them privately. He allowed time for them to explain their views. He calmly told them where they were in error and that they must recant their position. They were unwilling to do this.

A second meeting was called with this couple – the pastor asked me to attend that meeting and to act as the Church witness. I took notes as they went through this discussion again – at more length and with the pastor giving Scripture, catechism and canon law points of view. The husband and wife were quite well read – they stuck to their position. As a sidenote – from my listening to this – the couple were using very, very selected quotes from Scripture and Vatican II. They were not acting with the mind of the Church.

The net result was that the pastor told them they were removed from leadership in the parish. Further, they could not be Eucharistic Ministers, lectors or serve in the choir. He told them that if they would renounce their position and go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, he would release them from this. The couple felt they were right – they were quite upset. They phoned a lot of people trying to stir things up. But the pastor's position was, of course upheld and the couple gave up all leadership work in the Church. I don't have an ending to this story because we moved – but the pastor did this exactly the way Scripture tells us to deal with such disagreements. And make no mistake – we are human – and disagreements are part of human nature. Ask any married couple who are past their honeymoon stage.

I want to make one other point about handling problems between us... whether between family members... between an addict and a spouse or sibling... between a pastor and a member of the parish. For some of us – and I must confess that I really (REALLY) fall into this category.

Sometimes, in disagreements, we may decide that the answer to conflict and resolution is to pray about it. There is certainly nothing wrong with praying.... Prayer is a good thing. BUT – if someone has hurt you... if someone has made what you believe to be a dreadful mistake – prayer alone may leave a lot of unresolved issues or frustration. Talking is necessary with the other party. If you don't talk to the other person.... You can be an enabler... oh – it's alright... He was just upset. He didn't mean it. I'll say a prayer – it'll be okay. Now, as I said – I'm not preaching to the choir – I'm also preaching to myself.... Well – to anyone who thinks that prayer alone will make serious people problems simply disappear.

As an assignment, this week we can take a look at the people in our lives we have harmed, and those who have harmed us. We can strive to make peace. We can follow the tested wisdom in this weekend's scriptures. As we hear in today's Psalm, "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts."

Our faith calls us to action. Our action can make a wonderful opportunity to go to work in our lives and in the lives of those who have harmed us. May we not miss any opportunity we might be given to bring someone closer to God and reconciliation. As we hear in today's Gospel, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." God can be with us to bring about miracles. And if you'd like to talk to me about something I've done to offend you, why not invite me for a chocolate milkshake at the Dairy Queen? Have a good week!

(Parts of this reconciliation process come from Scripture, of course. Part of the handling of this came from the wonderful Dr. Scott Hahn from the St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology)

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.

Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD;

let us acclaim the rock of our salvation.

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;

let us joyfully sing psalms to him.

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us bow down in worship;

let us kneel before the LORD who made us.

For he is our God,

and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Oh, that today you would hear his voice:

“Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,

as in the day of Massah in the desert,

Where your fathers tempted me;

they tested me though they had seen my works.”

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Reading II

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.”