

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - A Cycle

September 4, 2011

INTRODUCTION - (Ezekiel 33, 7-9) (Romans 13, 8-10) (Matthew 18, 15-20) Our first reading takes us back six hundred years before Christ as God explains to his prophet Ezekiel his responsibility as a prophet. Ezekiel must warn God's people of their sinful ways or he will be held accountable. It is a prelude to the gospel where Jesus instructs his followers how to help each other stay on the right track. St. Paul's teaching on love in our second reading reminds us that if we should try to correct one another, it should be done out of love.

HOMILY - There was an 85 year-old lady who found her husband in bed with another woman. She was so enraged that she dragged him to the balcony of their Miami high-rise and pushed him off, and he fell to his death. She was arrested, of course, and when she appeared before the judge he asked if she had anything to say in her own defense. "Well, your honor," she said, "I figured if he were able to be unfaithful to his wife at age 92, he surely would be able to fly." (Reader's Digest, Laughter, the Best Medicine, pg 365)

We've all had times when we were angry enough to throw someone off a high building, but that's not the way Jesus tells us to deal with the sin of another person. St. Matthew's gospel contains five large sections of Jesus' teachings that are called "major discourses." We are all familiar with the first major discourse we call "the Sermon on the Mount." Our gospel today is taken from the fourth major discourse called the Social Discourse where he teaches us how he expects his followers to treat others. Our gospel introduces one of the topics Jesus spoke on in the Social Discourse with these words: "If your brother sins against you?" Two of the oldest and best Greek manuscripts do not have the words "against you." They say simply "if your brother sins" period. Most commentators hold that the words "against you" were not part of the original gospel. Thus our topic today is how to deal with a person who has committed or is committing some sin. Jesus outlines a three-step process: 1) talk with the person personally to win them over; i.e., to sway them to give up their wrongdoing; if that approach fails 2) confront the person in the presence of two or three witnesses and 3) bring the person before the whole Church. As a last step, if the person does not repent, they are to be excluded from the community; i.e., they are excommunicated. At issue here is obviously a sin of a serious and public nature. One wouldn't go through this process if it were over some small issue.

Excommunication is a process that is very rare today; It is applied only for the most serious sins. Examples of such sins would be: abortion, a priest breaking the seal of confession, a person trying to say Mass who is not ordained, physically attacking the Holy Father. These are serious sins that can be very destructive to a community - like a deadly contagious disease. The process is meant to give the offender every opportunity to repent of their sinful ways. Although excommunication is reserved for the most serious offenses, today's topic does have a meaning for a majority of us here. I have spoken with many parents or grandparents who are distressed over the kind of life their children or grandchildren are living and they don't know what to do about it. Today's gospel encourages all of us to do what we can to lead another, who is straying

from God's ways, back to our Lord. This is a very sensitive, challenging and difficult thing to do. It must always be done in love. In my efforts at times to do this, I think many of those who received my encouragement to turn over a new leaf recognized I was doing it for their best interest, and I was. In all truthfulness, I was also mindful of God's warning to Ezekiel in today's first reading: if "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." Those are strong words. I know that in the old days, when I was growing up, priests were often very stern and sometimes harsh and their attitude drove a lot of people away from Church. I know that's why I held back from saying what I should have said at times. I'm sure that I will have some accounting to do for times I didn't speak out. In reminding a person of their religious obligations, I'm not proposing I am holier than anyone else. God will judge that. I just try to do what I think our Lord wants. I usually encourage other people to do that too - to just try.

It isn't easy to do, trying to live holy lives, because we have our culture working against us. However, Christianity has often had to be counter-cultural. In the early centuries people were put to death because they were Christians. Now we are free to practice our faith, and while many people believe in God or in Christ, practicing that faith is not always a high priority in today's world.

I guess I'm preaching to the choir here, because if practicing your faith isn't important to you, you wouldn't be here. So thank you for coming.

When I was a young priest, I was going to convert the world. I found out converting just one person is often a challenge. People don't like to change if they are comfortable with their way of life. Don't get discouraged if you try to lead someone away from doing something that is harming them. If your efforts fall on deaf ears, there is always prayer, which Jesus reminds us of at the end of today's gospel. Prayer is something we can and should always do for those we care about and want to help. I will end with the same words St. James used to end his letter: "whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his (or her) soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." (James 5,20) Amen.