

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Ezekiel 33:7-9

Psalms 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9

Romans 13:8-10

Matthew 18:15-20

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I'd like to talk about the implications of our readings for our relationships with one another. I don't know about you, but when I have a quarrel with someone I care about, I tend to react in one of two ways: neither of them very helpful, and neither of them very Christian.

One reaction is to try to deal with the pain by cutting the other person off. The thought that flashes through my mind is something like, "Fine, if that's the way they feel, the heck with them. I have enough to deal with without this kind of nonsense. I can get along perfectly well without them."

This is a textbook example of the kind of hardening of heart that our psalm warns against. We *can't* get along perfectly well without one another. That basic truth is at the heart of Jesus' message. If we're to make anything of our lives we have to love God *and* one another. Every time our hurt feelings cause us to neglect this teaching, we diminish ourselves, and our lives can quickly come to seem joyless and pointless.

My other reaction is to pretend the painful incident didn't happen. I'm tempted to believe that if I ignore the situation it will go away; that everything will be like it was before. Our readings counsel against this strategy. Our faith doesn't allow us to ignore a problem, hoping it will somehow magically disappear. Instead, Jesus urges us to confront the situation, confident that he will be with us as we work for reconciliation.

And in seeking reconciliation we don't assume that all the blame lies with the other person. G. K. Chesterton got it about right when he wrote that, "In most quarrels, and in *every* family quarrel, everyone is at fault.

Our efforts to work things out must be motivated by *love*. Not the kind of love that glosses over people's harmful words and deeds, or that too easily lets them remain "just the way they are." It is rather a love that gives us the courage to make the first move in peacemaking, despite our fear that the other person will use the encounter as an opportunity to injure us again.

And when the other person has dared to speak first, it is love that restrains us from lashing out with the devastating remark that we have, in our resentment, been preparing with such care since the first encounter; that perfect response that didn't occur to us till later. People we love make themselves vulnerable to us. We are tempted to abuse that vulnerability by using our knowledge of the other person to craft a verbal weapon that can injure them as no stranger could. Love holds us back.

When the other person is the first to seek reconciliation, it can help to reflect that in doing so they are paying us a great compliment. They are trusting that we aren't the kind of person who would use the opportunity to twist the knife.

The Rule of St. Benedict, by which Benedictine monks live, has some pertinent words on this topic. Regarding monks who will not amend after repeated corrections, St. Benedict writes, "The abbot should follow the procedure of a wise physician. After he has applied the ointment of encouragement, the medicine of divine Scripture, and finally the cauterizing iron of excommunication and strokes of the rod. . . if he then perceives that his earnest efforts are unavailing, let him apply an even

better remedy.”

At this point we have to wonder what’s left. What might this ultimate weapon be, which is to be applied after even drastic measures have failed? Is the fellow to be taken by the scruff of the neck and thrown out of the monastery? No. The abbot “and all the brothers should pray for him, so that the Lord, who can do all things, may bring about the health of the sick brother.”. . . . The still greater remedy is *prayer*.

Prayer is the best remedy because Jesus adds his prayers to ours. When we are gathered in his name Jesus is with us -and never more so that when we come together to celebrate the Eucharist. At Mass, we *all* gather as sinners in need of reconciliation. There Jesus is in our midst as the one who reconciles us to the Father and to one another. There we see that we are after all, in spite of our differences, one Body, one people, one Church. We are *one* in the debt that binds us to love one another.