

XXIII Sunday (A) Matthew 18:15-20 -2020

A young woman, Lydia, strayed from the church as a teenager. After nine years of experimenting with atheism, Spiritism, and new age, she found her way back again to the church, by the grace of God. Relating her story, Lydia said that what hurt her the most in all her nine years of spiritual exile is that nobody in the church missed her. Nobody ever phoned or visited to find out what was wrong. "I got the impression that the church does not want me," she said. Of course, the church wants her. But what are we doing to help the many men and women in her situation find their way back into full communion with the church? Today's readings invite us to review our 'I don't-care' attitude towards fallen and lax members of the church, reminding us that, yes; it should be our business to reach out to them.

The first part of today's gospel is one of the difficult passages in Matthew's gospel to interpret. Many Bible commentators think that Jesus never said these things, but that probably they were a later addition by the Church because 1) There was no organized Church at that time. 2) Jesus never considered a sinner as a hopeless case, and 3) Jesus loved Gentiles and tax collectors.

What Jesus actually meant was, "Do whatever you can to make the guilty person realize and confess his fault, thus helping him to repair the damage he or she has done to his or her personal and communal relationships." Jesus seems to suggest the following steps to repair a broken personal relationship: If you are sure that somebody has wronged you, tell him lovingly and politely that he has hurt you. If the first step does not work, meet him again in the company of two or three wise and honorable persons and try to make the culprit realize what he has done wrong. If steps one and two do not work, bring his case to the pastor or to the parish council or the Christian fellowship. If the culprit remains stubborn, like a Gentile or proud tax collector, pray for him and leave him to God's mercy.

We do not have to agree on everything. There are legitimate differences in perspectives. But mutual respect and love must always prevail. Respect includes abiding by the discretionary decisions of those in authority, even though you feel that you would have done

differently if you were in charge. The goal of the resolution of a conflict in a community is to maintain the peace, harmony and unity. Division in the church is not Christian.

Another reflection about today's gospel is that you are your brother's/sister's keeper. Modern believers tend to think that they have no right to intervene in the private lives of their fellow believers; so they pay no heed to the serious obligation of encouraging an erring brother or sister to give up his or her sinful ways. Others evade the issue saying, "As a sinner, I don't have the moral courage or the right to correct another one." But Jesus emphatically affirms that we are our brothers' keepers, and we have the serious obligation to correct others in order to help our neighbors retain their Christian faith and practice, especially through our model Christian lives. Have we offered advice and encouragement to our friends and neighbors and coworkers when it was needed, and loving correction in private where that was possible? Let us admit the fact that a great degree of indifference to religion shown by our young men and women is due to lack of parental control, training and example. If the children of Christian families grow up as practical pagans, it is mainly because the Christian faith has meant little or nothing to their parents. It is a well-known fact that when parents are loyal to their faith in their daily lives, their children will, as a rule, be loyal to it. So, parents, please be good role models. And this is the good news of today.