

Deacon Bill Koffel  
Twenty-Third Sunday (Year A)  
September 6, 2020  
Ezekiel 33:7-9; Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20

Last month I was on a Zoom call with a half dozen of my high school friends. We graduated from St. Xavier High School in Cincinnati, Ohio, fifty-four years ago. We remained close through college and have kept tabs on one another ever since. Most of the call was about catching up on family news, who is now retired and who is still working, and what some of our other classmates are up to. At one point during the call, though, my friend Pete told us about a conversation he'd recently had with another friend of his, a friend who had been a classmate in college at Holy Cross. During that conversation, Pete and his friend discovered that they were on opposite sides in our current political environment. What started as a friendly conversation turned into a heated argument, and both Pete and his friend said some very insulting things to each other. After they finished talking, Pete said he decided he didn't want to have anything more to do with this friend.

Some months later, Pete's friend sent him a note of apology for the insulting things he had said, and Pete said he was moved to respond with his own apology for his insulting words. They apologized not for the views they held but for the way they had insulted each other.

Today's scripture readings reminded me of Pete's story. Their reconciliation mirrored the process Jesus had outlined for brothers and sisters to engage in when one has been wronged by the other. "Tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother." Pete and his friend each recognized their fault, and in doing so they won each other over.

Today's first reading from the prophet Ezekiel concerns a similar question, but it's about communal wrongdoing rather than individual wrongdoing. How should we respond when we see unjust and wicked things happening in our society? The Lord tells Ezekiel that he should speak out against wrongdoing and injustice, that he should warn those who do wicked things and try to turn them away from their wrongdoing.

Jesus repeatedly tells us that we must not be in the business of judging other people's hearts, but we are called to do what we can to promote justice and peace in our world. We are called to recognize and defend the basic human dignity of every person in our community.

In our contemporary world one of the ways we do that is by our active engagement in civic life, especially by educating ourselves about issues and candidates for whom we may be asked to vote.

Five years ago, the Catholic Bishops put out a booklet called “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship.” It’s a teaching document about our call to participate in public life and contribute to the common good. The document applies Catholic social teaching to various issues our country is facing. The Bishops do not, and cannot, tell Catholics who to vote for. They state this explicitly in the booklet (#7): “In this statement, we bishops do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. Our purpose is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God’s truth. We recognize that the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.”

In a new introductory letter to the booklet, the Bishops identify some of the issues that need to be considered. Their opposition to abortion is well known, but they also focus on other important issues, including racism, the environmental crisis, poverty, gun violence, and the death penalty. They cite Pope Francis’s concerns about migration, xenophobia, racism, global conflict, and care for creation. All of these, and others, are issues for Catholics to weigh in considering how to cast their votes.

There is a particular focus this year on combatting the wounds of racism. The bishops issued a pastoral letter against racism, “Open Wide Our Hearts,” in November 2018. You can find this document and the booklet on Faithful Citizenship on the website for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, Cardinal Sean and the other three bishops of Massachusetts issued a statement regarding police reform legislation that Governor Baker and the Massachusetts legislature is presently working on. They pledge their full support to the cultural shift towards meaningful reforms in the area of racial justice. They don’t pretend to know the business of policing, and they acknowledge that the vast majority of police officers in Massachusetts are capable and honorable public servants who serve and protect all citizens with distinction. They are not endorsing any particular bill, but they do support creating a “best practice model for meaningful reform.”

The message in all of today’s readings is summarized succinctly in Paul’s letter to the Romans: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And “Love does no evil to the neighbor.”

Let’s take these words to heart as we engage with one another during the next two months before election day on November 3<sup>rd</sup>.