

September 6, 2020

Ez 33:7-9; Rom 13:8-10; Mt 18:15-20

A lot of times, people can do things to us that get us upset. Sometimes these are things are wrongs done to us, other times, we get mad because of something that they did that hurts someone else. We can get upset with someone when they do this and it can cause us to take the offense personally. Today Jesus is telling us that when one of our brothers and sisters does wrong, we are not just to attack them to put them in their place, or even to pass over it and say nothing. But how do we know what response we ought to make?

Jesus says in the Gospel: *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.* Jesus is telling us the first level of response to someone who does wrong to you - go and bring it up with them privately. If they don't listen, then bring in others to support the opinion. Give the person a chance to see the error of their ways and make a correction before you get a whole group of people on their back. Bring it to their face first before you spread it around to a bunch of people. Sometimes our anger at being wronged leads us to try to form a firing squad for the person as a first response. Remember that we have to examine our own motives too, and be sure that we are right. I can think of many times that I thought I knew what was going on, I was sure that I was right, I was sure that the person deserved to be taken down a peg - but later found out that I was wrong. Really, if we are thinking in this way we are - taking a line from last week's Gospel - thinking as human beings do and not as God does. What is central and important is a little statement Jesus makes: *If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.* The goal is to win him over, to achieve reconciliation - not to beat him down and punish him for misdeeds.

Jesus goes on to say that if the person does not listen, if you are unable to win the person over and achieve reconciliation - then bring others in to help explain. Sometimes a variety of views and different voices can help the person see, and can help bring peace. Maybe the other people will help us to see that we got it wrong as well and will help both parties to make the changes necessary for forgiveness. Notice that the goal here is not to bring in a bunch of people to beat up on the person - the goal still is reconciliation. Jesus' statement *If he listens to you, you have won over your brother* applies here just as much as before. The final step that Jesus outlines is also spoken of by St. Paul elsewhere and amounts to excommunication of the individual from the body of the Church. It is a step that is formally and officially taken through the authority that Jesus mentioned in last week's Gospel. It is a harsh penalty to *treat them as a*

Gentile and a tax collector in other words to ignore them as if they were not there and not speak to them (that's what this really implies). But as the parable of the lost sheep that comes before this Gospel, and the instruction to forgive over and over that comes after this Gospel help us to see - the goal always is to bring the lost one back into the fold, to find the lost sheep, to forgive the sinner, and to win the individual over. The goal of any of these steps - as should be the goal for any step we take with anyone who hurts us - is to achieve reconciliation. It can be a lot of work, it takes a lot of patience. It takes a lot of caring for the person who hurt us.

You may say: "Well maybe it is just best to say nothing. Let the person do what they are going to do. Forget this tedious process of figuring out my motives and correcting them." I'll just cut them off and then they can be forgotten. But this is not what the Lord is calling us to do either. We don't grow and neither does the other person by such avoidance. Listen to the 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. But if you warn the wicked ... you shall save yourself.* We are not to simply let those who are straying from the way of the Lord and harming us or others to just go their way. We are not to just let the injustices we see happen without making some attempt to intervene - for we will be held responsible when we did not act. If by our efforts we succeed in changing the situation ... then great! If we don't succeed then we have gained the favor of the Lord for working to bring about justice. The offender will bear the responsibility for not hearing.

The goal is to bring about peace and justice by addressing wrongs and injustices in love. In our second reading we heard: *The commandments ... are summed up in this ... "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no evil to the neighbor.* If we can address the wrongdoer (either who has hurt us, who hurt others, or just bothered us) and do it while loving them at the same time - we will be fulfilling this great commandment. We will approach others in a kinder way, and both have a chance to grow. To address the wrongdoer in love - not with the intention of punishment or revenge, but with compassion despite their wrongdoing - this is what God calls us to do. And really ... when we happen to be the offender, isn't that the way we would want to be treated?