

God's Image, Not Ours

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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There is a fine line between offering someone guidance and telling someone what to do. Offering guidance is a good thing. Any time we can offer suggestions, propose different perspectives, or direct others towards a more fulfilling life is an opportunity not to be missed. Today's scripture readings call us to do just this.

In our First Reading, God tells Ezekiel that he ought to tell the people that what they are doing is wicked. They need guidance and if he fails to intervene, God will hold him accountable for their wickedness as well. If he does intervene, even if they don't listen, his life will be saved and he will not be held guilty along with them. Then, in our Gospel from Matthew, Jesus encourages his followers to correct each other if any sins against another- first going directly to that person, then to a small group of witnesses, and finally, if they still don't listen, to the church. Again, offering guidance is a good thing, especially if someone has gone astray. It can help get them back onto the right path.

Too often, however, we fall into that second category of perhaps thinking we are offering guidance, but what we are really doing is telling people what to do. This is where we overstep our bounds and try to create and shape others how we think they should be. This is a violation of the image of God in that person. In some instances, it is abuse and can do a tremendous amount of damage.

The 20th century pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer cautioned the seminarians under his care against crossing this line. In his book *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer tells the seminarians: “God did not make this person as I would have made him. He did not give him to me as a brother for me to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above him the creator...God does not will that I should fashion the other person according to the image that seems good to me, that is, in my own image; rather in his very freedom from me God made this person in His image.” (93)

We are all made in the image of God. Nothing anyone can do to us or for us can improve upon that. God is the only one who can touch and shape that image. Bonhoeffer concludes with a humble acknowledgment that contains so much wisdom which we should all memorize: “I can never know beforehand how God’s image should appear in others.” (93)

Whenever we offer guidance to another person, we must be careful not to attempt to create that person in our own image.

Is the fact that each person is created in the image of God enough for me? It should.

In our second reading from St. Paul to the Romans, he writes, “love does no evil to the neighbor.” Let us pray that we may truly love our neighbors enough to not impose our image on them, but to allow the image of God to appear and unfold as God sees fit.