

6 September 2020

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 18:15-20

I remember being in Carson Park a couple years ago. I think I was cross country skiing there. I passed a man who was walking toward me. I was absorbed in my technique and exercise and so I did not hear him say hello. How do I know I did not hear him? Because shortly after I passed him by he yelled loudly and angrily, **"I said 'Hi' to you!!"** So, I threw a hello over my shoulder. **Evidently this man was emotionally fragile, perhaps with a mental illness. Sometimes such ones are in better touch with what is really going on in the world and between people than the rest of us.** He, for example, knew that he was somebody that should be acknowledged, that **he needed relationship with other people, and that it is wrong, a sin, for one person to ignore another person.**

God has a similar passion for us to acknowledge one another and be at peace with each other. The prime analogy is that God is a parent and we God's children. **What parent's heart would not grieve deeply when his or her children hate each other or won't talk to each other?**

Today's Gospel account shows us that God has a passion for reconciliation. It goes to great lengths to show us how to heal after we've been hurt by someone. **Basically it's a lot of work! If you're the one who was hurt, you need to have the courage to confront the person who hurt you directly as a first step.** It's so much easier not! (as we all know). I bet every one of us wouldn't have to think too hard before coming up with an example of a time when we went to a third party to complain about someone instead of humbly and vulnerably approaching that person directly. "Say, do you know the other day when you took my idea and presented it to the boss like it was yours...or when you called me immature in front of others...or when...well, that really hurt, it seems unfair, and I need that to stop." And then **on the part of the one who did the hurting it takes a lot of humility to listen before getting defensive.** That's so hard, but good Christians who have grown accustomed to repenting of their sins should have not such a hard time admitting fault.

As people of faith, we believe that we are most ourselves when we are in communion with each other. This is because we know that beneath our superficial differences is a unity of being children of God together, brothers and sisters. More powerful than our sins which divide us is the love that unites us. What makes it a LOT easier is knowing that this is what God wants. God loves it when we get along in the midst of our differences we recognize and celebrate our deeper unity. To quote our Second Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation, God's Spirit is at work (i.e. God love it!) when enemies begin to speak to one another, when hatred is quenched by mercy and vengeance gives way to forgiveness."

We don't confront someone's sins in order to nail him or her to the wall, but to make the relationship right again.

Maybe you've heard of **the film *The Straight Story*** based on the true story of Alvin Straight, from Iowa, who knew he was coming to the end of his life before long, whose driver's license was taken from him, but who was haunted by a years-long divide between him and his brother Lyle. He snuck away from the house where he lived with his daughter and took off on a John Deere riding mower, with a small trailer in tow and proceeded on a journey of 240 miles from Laurens, Iowa to Blue River, Wisconsin. Through many danger, toils and snares, as they say, he arrived at his brother's house.

When he arrived and saw the porch and a rocking chair empty, you could hear the growing fear in his voice as he called out for his brother—"Lyle!"—and the relief when his brother emerged from the house onto the porch. "Alvin?" his brother asked before inviting him onto the porch. The film ends with the two of them seated on the porch and exchanging one line each. Lyle asks, "Did you ride that thing all the way out here to see me?" "I did, Lyle," Alvin says, before the camera moves upward toward heaven.

We never hear what they say after that. In fact, we never hear what their conflict was about in the first place. But in the silence of that porch, we realize that they both came to know that nothing is more important than being in good relationship with each other.

Our lives don't always feature such story-book endings. Often we are forced to live with relationships unreconciled and accept what we cannot change. But we should never forget that we are never more ourselves than when we all partake of the one loaf, the Eucharist which calls us to be at peace with each other.