

September 7, 2014
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mt 18:15-20

[Jesus said to the disciples] "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, so that 'every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.

Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, (amen,) I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Background:

The last two gospels have been turning points for both Jesus and for the disciples. Two weeks ago Jesus asked the disciples who they believed he was. Peter spoke up saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16) Last week, Jesus told them that his role as Messiah would mean suffering, rejection and death. Peter again spoke up and expressed his hope that Jesus would be spared such a fate. Besides forcibly correcting Peter, Jesus also instructed them all that if they were to be his followers, they too must be willing to lose their lives. Last week's text ended the 16th chapter of Matthew's gospel.

The gospel for this week is taken from the 18th chapter of Matthew's text. The church, in choosing texts for our reflection at Sunday Masses, has decided to skip the entire 17th chapter and the first 14 verses of the 18th chapter at this point in the liturgical year. If time permits it may be helpful to read those verses. For those who do not have the opportunity read the text that will be skipped in the Sunday Lectionary, here is a list of the events that Matthew describes in those verses.

The Transfiguration of Jesus

Jesus' instruction regarding the coming of Elijah

The healing of a boy who is possessed by a demon

A second prediction of Jesus' suffering and death

Jesus being questioned about paying the temple tax

Jesus teaching the disciples that the greatest in the realm of God is like a little child

A stern warning to those who would lead a child into sin

The parable of the lost sheep

The last two teachings of Jesus in the above list draw attention to Jesus' concern for the lost.

They provide the backdrop for the instruction to the disciples in the text for this week.

Jesus lived in a culture where allegiance to family and honor were deeply-held values. In this society conflict could easily escalate into violence. Therefore there was a real need to deal with the conflicts that did arise. The motivation in the gospel is, clearly, to reach out in compassion in a way that does not draw attention or embarrassment to the person who feels they have been offended. When a situation becomes public, the parties feel a need to protect their honor and not appear weak or vulnerable. Everyone needs to protect their reputation, so the quicker and quieter the situation can be dealt with, the easier it is to maintain peace and avoid violence. Jesus' instruction puts the responsibility for taking action on the one who experienced a perceived offense. The obvious omission is the determination of who is the true source of the offense. That does not seem to be the issue for Jesus. Restoring the relationship and avoiding violence that can be passed on from one generation to the next is the focus.

Typically in this culture, disagreements were not settled by logic or by a convincing line of reasoning, but rather on the number and status of those who could be gathered to support one's point of view. Therefore, if the private and personal approach did not restore the relationship, then one used means that were part of the culture, getting others and, if needed, the church involved. If that was unsuccessful, the person lost their relationship with the community. They were treated as a non-member of the community or as a traitor. While this may sound harsh in the world in which most contemporary western Christians live, in a culture like Jesus' where conflicts could easily lead to violence and death, treating another as lost or cut off is comparatively mild.

The second part of the text stresses the responsibility that the community played in reaching out to the lost and alienated of the community. What was bound on earth by those disciples of Jesus was bound in heaven. Those who failed to maintain their relationship, or refused to be reconciled, would also find it so in heaven. Nowhere in the instruction does it indicate that this admonition is meant just for the apostles or those who exercise roles of leadership. It is addressed to all the disciples.

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever been aware that your actions or words could lead to bloodshed and/or death? What do you think it would be like to live in that kind of situation? Can you think of people who do live in that kind of fear even today?
2. Have you ever had to stop associating with a person because of the potential physical or moral damage that continuing the relationship might cause?
3. Do you know people who have let go of hurts, insults and even violence? How does that affect them? What have you learned from them?
4. To what extent have you reached out to another in order to save a relationship? Has it been worth it?
5. Have there been times when you refused to reach out to another and the relationship was significantly damaged? Was it worth it?

6. What would happen if the Church sought to deal with erring members in a way described by this gospel? How might that affect the average parishioners in your parish? How would it affect you?
7. What is the most challenging part of this gospel text for you?
8. What is the most encouraging part of this gospel text for you?
9. How would you like to respond to Jesus' instruction to you in this text?

Reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM.

They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel.

To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to

annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Please include this information when printing or forwarding. Excerpts from the Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America, second typical edition © 2001, 1998, 1997, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. Used with permission. All rights reserved. No portion of this text may be reproduced by any means without permission in writing from the copyright owner.