

September 6, 2020
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:

For the past two weeks, the gospels have focused on a turning point in Matthew's gospel: Peter's declaration that Jesus was the messiah. This was a turning point for both Jesus and for the disciples. Two weeks ago, Jesus asked the disciples who they believed that he was. Peter spoke up saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16) Last week, Jesus told the disciples that because of his role as Messiah, he would undergo suffering, rejection, and death. Peter again spoke up and expressed his hope that Jesus would be spared such a fate. After Peter expressed this concern and hope for Jesus, Jesus further instructed the disciples that they too must be willing to lose their lives. Last week's text brought us to the end of 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 this text for our reflection, has passed over the entire 17th chapter and the first 14 verses of the 18th chapter. If time permits, it may be helpful to read through those verses. For those who do not have the opportunity to read the text that is 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 draw attention to Jesus' concern for the lost. They provide the backdrop for the instruction to the disciples that makes up the gospel for this week.

Jesus lived in a culture where allegiance to family and honor were deeply-held values. In that society, conflict could easily escalate into violence. Therefore, there was a need to deal with any conflict that might arise as quickly and privately as possible. Once a transgression reached the public forum, it became a matter of honor for one to either demand restitution or inflict similar or greater damage. The private social system worked in way that reached out in compassion, in a way that did not draw attention or embarrassment to the person who felt they had been offended.

Jesus' instruction puts the responsibility for taking the initial action on the one who believed they were offended. The hope is to restore the relationship, and the focus is on avoiding violence that can be passed on from one generation to the next.

When disagreements became public, those disagreements were not settled by logic, evidence, or a convincing line of reasoning. Rather, the more persuasive argument was the one made by the person whose supporters were more numerous and held greater esteem within the community. If the private and personal approach didn't resolve the issue, one resorted to the other public avenues. 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.

The second part of the gospel 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. The text itself does not indicate that this admonition is meant just for the apostles or for those who exercise roles of leadership. Jesus is addressing all of the disciples.

Reflection Questions:

1. Do you remember times when you felt offended by something another said or did? Are you able to recall the details of what happened? Can you recall how it impacted the relationship?
2. Have you ever been part of a situation where families or a portion of a community were permanently divided over something that took place?
3. Can you also recall times of forgiveness and reconciliation in your life?
4. Are you more likely to shrug off a hurtful incident, quietly walk away offended to tell someone who will be sympathetic, alter your relationship without any discussion, or...?
5. To what extent have you reached out to another to save a relationship?
6. Can you talk with God now as one who will listen attentively to whatever thoughts or feelings this gospel brings to the fore for you?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for September 6, 2020, the Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thus says the Lord: You, son of man, I have appointed watchman for the house of Israel; when you hear me say anything, you shall warn them for me.
If I tell the wicked, "O wicked one, you shall surely die, "
and 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, trying to turn him from his way,
and he refuses to turn from his way, he shall die for his guilt, but you shall save yourself.

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.
Come, let us sing joyfully to the Lord; let us acclaim the rock of our salvation.
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us joyfully sing psalms to him.
Come, let us bow down in worship; let us kneel before the Lord who made us.
For he is our God, and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.
Oh, that today you would hear his voice: "Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as in the day of Massah in the desert, where your fathers tempted me;
they tested me though they had seen my works."

Brothers and sisters: Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another;
for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.
The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal;
you shall not covet, " and whatever other commandment there may be,
are summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.

Jesus said to his 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, 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."

Excerpts from Ezekiel 33:7-9; Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9; Romans 13:8-10; and Matthew 18:15-20