

September 10, 2023
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:

Two weeks ago, in the gospel for the 21st Sunday of Ordinary time (Matthew 16:13-20), Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16)." Jesus' response was to say, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father... (Matthew 16:17)." Last week in the gospel for the 22nd Sunday, Jesus then spoke of his upcoming rejection by the elders, chief priests, and scribes in Jerusalem. To this Peter responded, "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you," and Jesus' response was "Get behind me, Satan. You are an obstacle to me..." (Matthew 16:21-22). Jesus also told his disciples that they too must be willing to follow him and accept their own suffering and death. This is a turning point in Matthew's gospel for Jesus and the disciples. From this point, Jesus begins to make his way toward Jerusalem.

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 those verses. For those who do not have the opportunity to 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

This week's gospel text itself may sound out of character for Jesus, who himself ate with tax collectors and sinners and spoke of the need to be ever willing to forgive the faults of others. It also speaks of the role of the church in trying to bring a person to recognize their error, and Jesus addressed this to his disciples, which is not what most think of as church.

What seems authentic for our understanding of Jesus is the desire expressed here that Jesus' disciples are called to actively address a situation where an offense has arisen. It is not to be left to fester, but dealt with, in way that puts reconciliation and sensitivity to the other as primary.

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, the need was to deal with any conflicts 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 demand restitution or inflict similar or greater damage. The social system worked when reaching out in

compassion 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, they were not settled by logic, evidence, or a convincing line of reasoning. Rather the more persuasive argument was made by the one whose supporters were more numerous and held greater esteem within the community. Therefore, if the private and personal approach failed, one resorted to the other 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 the disciples.

Reflection Questions:

1. Do you remember times when you felt offended by another? Can you recall how it impacted the relationship? How did you respond to the situation?
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 recall times of forgiveness and reconciliation in your life?
4. Are you more likely to shrug off a hurtful incident, or quietly walk away offended and tell someone who will be sympathetic, or alter your relationship without any discussion, or deal with it some other way?
5. When have you reached out to another when a relationship has been wounded?
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

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscs-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for September 10, 2023, 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

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for September 10th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. In the gospel from Matthew, Jesus teaches his disciples, first about how to deal with a brother who sins against you, and then about prayer and the certainty that prayers are heard. Regarding the one who sins against you, "Tell him his fault, between you and him, alone." If that does not resolve it, "take one or two others, and establish the facts." If he refuses to listen, "tell the church," and if this fails, have nothing more to do with him. Regarding prayer, "If two of you agree about what to pray for, it shall be granted by the Father. Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." The other readings also have references to reconciliation after wrongdoing, and avoidance of wrongdoing. In the first reading, the Lord tells Ezekiel: "I have appointed you watchman. Warn the wicked to turn from his way. If you do not, he shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death." Psalm 95 proclaims, "If you hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the day of Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested

me though they had seen my works." In the second reading, from the letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another. The commandments are summed up, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law."

Two weeks ago in the gospel, Jesus declared Peter to be the rock upon which he would build his church, and he told him, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven." He added, "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." In today's Gospel, Jesus repeats that last statement, this time granting (not the keys, but) authority to bind and loose, to all the disciples.

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!