

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage for this Sunday comes from the Gospel of Matthew 18:15–20. In this reading, Jesus teaches us the importance of charitable correction for those who are harming themselves or the community. Disciples have the responsibility of helping others pursue a life of holiness, and sometimes that can require helping others turn away from serious and sinful actions. This passage is an important instruction for us on how we can seek the good of others in the most constructive and charitable way. The Lord knows that when we are offended we will respond. In this passage, Jesus is teaching disciples to respond in the right way.

For a Christian disciple, the experience of loving our neighbor means that we seek what is good for them in the eyes of God. God created each of us in the hope that we would live our lives in fulfillment of the Lord's will. Sin causes us to discard God's will in favor of our own misguided desires and disordered false values. Sin causes us to become less than the person God created us to be. God hates sin because sin wounds and destroys the human person whom God loves. Christian disciples understand the responsibility of helping one another recognize and overcome our misguided desires and false values so that we may become fully the person God intends. When someone wrongs us, our instinctive response is usually one of defense or aggression. Oftentimes this instinctive response can manifest itself in destructive ways such as gossip, slander, anger, antagonism and so forth. The reality is that sometimes we can make ourselves feel better about our own flawed lives by pointing out the seemingly greater faults of others. When this dynamic occurs, someone else's sin can actually lead us to sin even more. Jesus teaches us a different way to respond. Our Lord instructs us to pursue a supernatural way of responding to another's wrongful actions. First, we are to make the other person aware of how their actions have harmed us. This is necessary because sometimes people simply may not even realize that they have caused harm. Paradoxically, the initiative for reconciliation is presented as the responsibility of the one offended. Pointing out the harm that another has caused, then, is not a matter of attaching blame or guilt but of assisting them in understanding the negative impact their actions have on the wider community.

Second, we are to be motivated by love that seeks conversion, reconciliation, and growth in holiness rather than by anger or hurt that seeks revenge, punishment, or humiliation. Fraternal correction can be difficult because it risks misunderstanding, vulnerability, or even aggravating a situation, but it is a part of discipleship. What parent does not manifest their love for their children by helping them correct their faults? What friend doesn't help another friend by wanting to help them become a better person? Fraternal correction is one of the most loving things we can do for another person. It's also something the Lord expects of us. Ezekiel warns us that we are, indeed, the watchmen for our neighbor and that our silence will condemn us if we fail to warn them of the harmful nature of their actions (cf. Ez 3:18; 33:6). Mere knowledge of another's harmful actions imposes on us an obligation to help them.

How have you learned to overcome faults through the fraternal correction of another person?

What are some of the instinctive ways you see people responding to the hurtful actions of others?

With whom do you need to practice fraternal correction at this time?

What action in your life is most harmful to others?

What is the greatest example of fraternal correction you have ever witnessed?

What qualities are necessary to engage in fraternal correction?

What qualities are necessary to receive fraternal correction?

How does the practice of fraternal correction go against our individualistic culture?

Next, Jesus expands the scope of fraternal correction to address situations of reluctant repentance. Love requires that we never stop seeking the good of another even when our individual efforts for another's repentance fail. Rather, we are to enlist the help of others in a way that lovingly respects the privacy and dignity of those who have offended us. Sometimes people need to know that their actions affect the community and not just themselves or one other person. Any sin, any hurt inflicted on the Body of Christ, weakens and hurts the entire body. Thus, the individual offenses of one person, even through seemingly private sins, actually affect all of us. The goal of introducing others into the loving conversation of fraternal correction is not to create an intimidating situation or to alienate them but to help them realize the love of the Christian community. It is that community which seeks their change of heart and reconciliation. Only in the face of persistent lack of repentance is the issue to be brought before "the Church". While this term can mean the entire local community, it most likely refers to the leader(s) of the community, since that is how fraternal correction was practiced in the first century. Thus, the respect for the privacy and dignity of those who have offended us remains important even after repeated refusals to repent. It is here that Jesus prescribes the disciplinary action of treating them as a Gentile or tax collector. That action is meant to remove them from communion with the Christian assembly for serious sins. Even in this extreme case, the goal of the action is not punishment, humiliation, or revenge but rather to elicit their conversion by awakening them to the seriousness of their actions and the damaging impact of their behavior on the community. Even the discipline of excommunication is intended for the ultimate purpose of reconciliation. Other New Testament Epistles confirm that the practice of excommunication occurred in the early Church as an effective discipline that brought about the conversion of others who had seriously sinned (1 Cor 5:1–5, 2 Thes 3:6–15, 2 Jn 10).

What are serious sins that the Christian community needs to guard against today so that our common life is not disrupted or corrupted by those sins?

How does this explanation of excommunication change your understanding of the practice?

How do you feel when someone goes over your head to address a situation rather than first speaking to you directly?

When are you tempted to go over someone else's head before speaking to them directly?

Why do you think Jesus was so concerned about preserving the privacy and dignity of people who had done sinful things?

How can you protect the privacy and dignity of people today when they do sinful or hurtful things?

How does it change your understanding of personal sin to see it in the context of affecting the entire Body of Christ?

What values do you think we need to most protect in the Christian community today during times of difficulty or disagreement?

The process of fraternal correction that Jesus outlines in this Gospel passage is not only for the conversion of one who sins but also for the protection of everyone involved in the situation. Because we are human, we will always be in danger of overstepping our bounds in our relationships with others. It's possible that our own judgment can become skewed by anger and prejudice. Additionally, individual zeal can lead us to ignore the wisdom and perspective of others. Situations of persistent serious sin can both harm the Christian community as well as give rise to simmering feelings of anger and distrust when conflicts remain unresolved. Fraternal correction, as taught by Jesus, is a practice intended to protect all parties involved. Certainly the one who offends is protected against being judged by only one other person, whether by the individual offended or a single leader of the Christian community. Also, the one who offends is protected from persisting in harmful behaviors that adversely affect themselves and others. The one who is responsible for calling others to repentance is protected from their own limited view, knowledge, or experience of the situation thanks to the counsel of two or three witnesses. The community is protected from the unaddressed presence of sinful actions that can cause confusion and end up leading others astray by bad example or by lack of confidence in community leaders. Jesus wanted the Church to experience justice and mercy in such moments. Saint Thomas Aquinas taught about this necessary relationship between these two virtues when he said, "Mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution; and Justice without Mercy is cruelty."^[1]

When have you seen someone practice justice without mercy?

When have you seen mercy practiced without justice?

How do you protect against your own prejudice and impulsiveness when you have to practice fraternal correction?

What serious sin today has the potential to confuse, corrupt, or disrupt the communion of the Christian faithful?

Why do you think Jesus considered fraternal correction so important that He gave a detailed teaching about it to the first disciples?

One final note should be mentioned regarding Jesus' closing words to this instruction. Our Lord tells the disciples that whatever they bind or loose on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven. He also assures them that when two of them agree and ask the Father, it will be done for them. In closing, Jesus promises His presence to be with the disciples when two or three of them are gathered in His name. Each of these three closing statements is relevant for our lives as disciples and especially for the way in which we approach situations of serious sin in the lives of others. The first statement concerning binding and loosing promises divine recognition of the disciple's actions and of discipline from within the community. This recognition is not to give the disciples a sense of power by which they mistakenly think they control

^[1] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Evangelium S. Matthaei Lectura*, Chapter V, 1, 2.

the Lord. Rather, it is to stress the seriousness of their decisions. Disciples must exercise caution when imposing disciplinary penalties. Such caution is warranted because their action of excommunication can have eternal consequences for those who are being disciplined. This caution is meant to restrain impulsive and punitive actions of Christian leaders lest they cause unnecessary spiritual suffering in the lives of others. Our Lord's promise to fulfill the request of disciples who agree must be kept in context in order to be properly understood. It is not intended to be a generic promise to grant us whatever we ask, whenever we ask it, no matter what. Rather, this promise is connected to the efforts for reconciliation and fraternal correction. Interpreted in this context, then, our Lord is promising to give divine assistance to our sincere efforts to reconcile and correct the seriously sinful behavior of others. It also reminds us that the first action in any effort of fraternal correction or Church discipline should be to pray for God's guidance and blessing on everyone involved. Lastly, our Lord's promise to be present where two or three are gathered in His name refers to more than just the liturgical context of prayer. The presence of Jesus is promised even to the Church when it is gathered for administrative decisions for the good of the community. This promise is also a caution to leaders that their decisions are to always be made in the spirit of Christ who oversees their discussions. When we know that Jesus is with us and cares deeply about the decisions we make, then we tend to exercise caution, diligence, and mercy. As the Lord said in Matthew 7:2, the way in which we judge others is the way in which God will judge us. The promise of our Lord's presence is not an implicit approval or assurance of divine favor for any decision we make. Rather, it is a caution that all our judgments are carefully scrutinized by God, who knows our intentions and can discern whether our actions are undertaken in a spirit of love, reconciliation, and repentance or in a spirit of condemnation, vindictiveness, and punishment. Jesus is in our midst when we gather in His name; He is present in the Church leaders entrusted with the responsibility to care for the good of its members, and He is present even in the wayward sinner who is reluctant to repent. Indeed, our Lord will reveal that He is always present in the least of our brothers and sisters (Mt 25:31–46), and how we treat them in their moment of need (even repentance) can be the cause of either our salvation or condemnation.

How do these final statements of Jesus cause you to reconsider the way you approach decisions concerning others?

When are you concerned that someone's eternal salvation may be affected by a decision you made concerning that person?

What do you pray for when you see someone doing harm to themselves or others?

How does Jesus' promise of His presence make you reconsider the motives for your actions especially when it involves how you respond to those who have hurt you?