

23RD SUNDAY A 2008 SEPTEMBER 7, 2008

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EZEKIEL 33:7-9 ROMANS 13:8-10

MATTHEW 18:15-20



In our country today there is probably not one family that has not had to deal with the terrible effects of drug or alcohol addiction. It does not matter whether it is father, mother, husband, wife, son, or daughter who has become a prisoner to alcohol or illegal or prescription drugs, facing the problem for both the person addicted and those who love that person often seems impossible. When, however, love overcomes fear and all concerned have the courage to face the problem and the determination to do something about it, there then comes a possibility of success. That love, courage, and determination must constantly be strengthened since the hold that such addictions have on a person often not only blinds them to their own ability to resist the addiction, but also to the true motives of those who are trying to help them.

Sin can be like an addiction in so far as a particular sin can become so much a part of our lives that we cannot seem to live without it or the effects it brings. Like addiction which can have such a negative effect on all those around the addict, so too sin can have just that kind of effect on others. While most of us would admit that sin can have such an effect, I think most of us tend to think of sin as a personal and private word or action which is best kept personal and private.

Yet, if we listen to our reading from the prophet Ezekiel this morning, that does not seem to be the position taken by God. Prophets had a special calling in the Old Testament. They were first of all sentinels who were given the task of looking and watching what was happening, and then they were also given the task of warning so that they might not be surprised by what was looming on the horizon. They were, however, not watching for the approach of a storm, or an enemy army. They were “moral” sentinels and warners whose duty it was to observe the moral and religious life of the leaders and people of Israel and to warn them of their impending doom if they continued in their evil ways. Such prophets as Jeremiah spoke for the Lord, and like the Lord they did not desire the destruction of any man or woman. Like God their desire was that sinners would undergo a conversion and return to God before it was too late. In some ways it was a terrible calling and a fearful mission. They were bound by God to watch and warn or suffer the same consequences as the sinners.

Today we reach the Eighteenth Chapter of Matthew's Gospel, the whole of which speaks directly to the life of those who follow Jesus, and which the Scripture scholar Raymond Brown referred to as the "Sermon on the Church." Much of this is found in Matthew alone which means he was trying to adapt Jesus' teaching to his mixed community of Jews and Gentiles, all of whom were sinners to some degree or another. Matthew is really the only one of the four Evangelists to speak about the "ecclesia," the Church. In our reading today he speaks about the role of the individual Christian and the Church in "fraternal correction." "If your brother sins against you go and tell him his fault between you and him alone." We should remember that this Reading was immediately preceded by the Parable of the Lost Sheep. There was established the mercy and forgiveness of the Lord, and His determination to seek out the lost sheep. Here, the message of the lost sheep and the Good Shepherd is placed within the community of believers. *How does one act like Christ in bringing back the lost sheep?* While a lost sheep might welcome the staff of Christ pulling him from a rocky thicket, just how welcoming would one of our brothers or sisters in faith be if you or I went to seek them out and bring them back to the fold. Certainly such charitable, fraternal correction is difficult and delicate, and it can only be done with tactfulness and humility. In approaching our brother or sister we must do so as sinner to sinner and not in some spiritually superior way. While we need to be fully aware of the way in which God's grace can change hearts and bring the lost back to Him, we need also to be aware that such a return may not happen immediately. We not only need patience, but we also need to understand that some do not accept God's grace when it is offered. Yet, Christ seems to tell us that we should never give up on sinners. We are told today to treat them like "tax collectors" and while our first response might be to think He means avoid them, we have to consider the way in which Christ treated tax collectors. He spoke with them, taught them, ate with them, and called them to Himself.

Maybe all of this is too idealistic. Few if any of us are going to leave this Church this morning and begin telling our neighbors that they are sinners and that they need to repent, and if we do most of us would be looked on as self-righteous hypocrites. And, perhaps rightly so, since Jesus did tell us to take the block of wood out of our own eye before we tried to take the speck out of our neighbor's eye. So, what are we then to make of these readings, what should they mean for us?

In His words and actions Jesus tells us, and the Gospel of John along with his Epistles and those of Paul tell us over, and over again that the basis of Christianity is love: God's love for us, our love for God, and our love for one another. Paul tells us in his Letter to the Romans

this morning, “Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” Love then has to be the basis and the motivation for any kind of fraternal correction. No one likes to hear about their faults, but if we know the one talking to us is motivated by their love for us, we might eventually come to see the truth in what they are saying.

The type of correction Matthew speaks about in his Gospel may have been possible in the early Church, which as we learn from the history of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, did have some structure in place for bringing this to fulfillment within the Church. Today, however, while the Sacrament of Reconciliation is always available, the kind of correction that might bring someone to seek the Sacrament can only begin in a mutually understood love, which means that we have to begin if we have not already done so to take responsibility for each other on the level where our love is most intimate. Parents should, although some seem afraid to, take such responsibility for their children. Parents not only are responsible for teaching children the difference between right and wrong; they are responsible for correcting them when they do wrong. Husbands and wives not only vow themselves to each other to share their bodies, more importantly they are vowed to share their lives. Any action on either’s part that leads to self-destruction also begins to destroy the marriage, and the spouse has the obligation in love to see that does not happen. Friends, true friends are as rare as hen’s teeth, and as precious as any treasure. If I am not willing to stop my friend from the self-destruction that sin wreaks in one’s life, I am a fraud as a friend.

So here it is: who do I love? Who do you love? Working from the position of love one might think it would be easier to confront the sinner. Unfortunately that is not the case. How many parents have you known who have made excuses for the drug addiction of their children? How many children or spouses have you known who will do everything for their alcoholic parent or spouse but confront them with the reality of their addiction? Don’t get me wrong, I am not saying that all sin is addiction, but all self-destructive actions are sinful. To confront the sinner or the addict is much the same. You first have to love deeply, and then you have to see realistically what is happening to the person you love. Finally you have to be willing to face the anger of the one you love so that he or she might begin to see the truth of what is happening to him or her. Finally, you must be able to accept initial failure, and yet to never give up constantly praying for strength for yourself and for light for the one you love. Always remembering as Paul tells us today, “Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.”