

**Twenty-Third
Sunday
in Ordinary
Time**

Year A



FIRST READING
Ezekiel 33:7-9

PSALM
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9

SECOND READING
Romans 13:8-10

GOSPEL
Matthew 18:15-20

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PRAYER

Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9

O come,
let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise
to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence
with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him
with songs of praise!
O come, let us worship
and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD,
our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people
of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.
O that today you would listen
to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts,
as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah
in the wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof,
though they had seen my work.

**READING
THE WORD**

First Reading
Ezekiel 33:7-9

So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.
If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand.
But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

Second Reading
Romans 13:8-10

Owe no one anything, 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 murder; You shall not

steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."
Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Gospel
Matthew 18:15-20

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.
Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For

where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

HEARING THE WORD

“Fraternal Correction”

As members of the civil society and the Christian community we constantly interact with one another, and, inevitably, experience a wide range of human behaviors. Some of these are positive and edifying while others negative and destructive. The liturgy of today focuses on the response to those behaviors and situations which go contrary to Christian character.

Ezekiel’s mission was very similar to that of Jeremiah’s – to prophesy the impending and inevitable destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple caused by Israel’s infidelities and sins. Chapter 33 of his book emphasizes the prophet’s responsibility who, acting as “a sentinel” (a watchman), is to warn and admonish the unfaithful nation. This mission is so important that God warns Ezekiel that if he does not deliver the message of warning and repentance to the sinners, the punishment for their sins will fall upon him. This serious responsibility rests on him as the first and necessary step leading to the nation’s repentance and restoration in the future. The prophet’s mission was to deliver the message of warning regardless of

the peoples’ acceptance or rejection of it. While repentance remains a personal choice, the prophet’s responsibility is to deliver the unpopular and challenging message no matter what, because, without it, repentance would never happen. As God’s mouthpiece he plays an indispensable part in changing the fortunes of the unfaithful people and transforming them into a renewed community open to God’s Spirit and living faithfully as God’s people (Ezek 36:22-28).

In the middle of the collection of exhortations and instructions written for the Roman community, Paul reminds Christians of their duties and obligations towards the secular authorities; they were to be exemplary citizens and not troublemakers (Rom 13:1-7). Following these statements, Paul turns to discuss the key duty of a Christian towards a fellow community member. He states that love sums up all the precepts of the Jewish law – all the commandments governing human relationships are contained within the command to love. He also defines love as that which “does no wrong to a neighbor”. Taken positively, this statement means that love, above all, seeks the good and well-being of another person. This is perhaps the clearest and simplest expressions of what Christian love is all about. Even though the apostle does not explicitly mention it, seeking the good of another person entails helping him or her to avoid harmful and dangerous be-

haviors, as Paul himself will do in the verses that immediately follow our passage (Rom 13:11-14). Following the command to love with a series of warnings, Paul demonstrates that cautioning and admonishing Christians against what jeopardizes their moral and religious integrity, is one of the key expressions of Christian love. Thus, correction and admonition of fellow members of the community when needed is the duty of a practicing Christian.

Today’s Gospel passage comes from Matthew 18, sometimes called “the sermon on the Church”. In it, Jesus’ teaching is exclusively focused on the internal life of the Christian community. Solving conflicts and dealing with wrongdoing are among the most important issues addressed. Jesus gives a detailed procedure on how to deal with wrongful behaviors. It involves a three-step process which begins with dialogue between the two members, followed by bringing in two or three other members to facilitate the correction and admonition, if everything else fails, bringing the issue to the attention of the entire community for judgment. If reconciliation and correction fails, the guilty party is to be excluded from the community and no longer treated as its member, but as a “Gentile and a tax collector”. The reason for such harsh measures lies in the recognition that the community is the very place where God is present. For the Israelites the location

which contained God's presence in this world was the Jerusalem Temple. There, God dwelt in the midst of humanity. Now, thanks to Jesus, this role was taken up by the Christian community. Jesus teaches that the Christian community acting in unity has the capacity to discern God's will. In the Gospel of the 21st Sunday we read that Peter was given the authority to "bind and loosen", which meant determining God's will for the community. The same is said in today's Gospel about the Christian community which, when gathered, has the capacity to determine God's will for the world. This is so because, when gathered and united in Jesus' name, a group of individuals becomes united with him and united to God through him. This is also the reason for which the prayers of such a group will always be answered, since they reflect God's own will. Conflicts and scandals undermine the unity of this body; they destroy it. For this reason, conflicts and wrongdoings must be dealt with swiftly and decisively. Admonition and correction are, therefore, the very essentials which ensure that the Christian community remains true to its nature and function.

Warning others is never an easy or popular task. It is so much simpler to remain silent and indifferent towards others' misbehaviors. Yet, the liturgy of today emphasizes that, while such restraint might be understandable, it is not acceptable. It was not acceptable for Ezekiel to remain silent regarding his peoples'

transgressions because his inaction would have compromised their future. Paul reveals that the command to love is fulfilled, at least partially, by warning and admonition of the fellow Christians when they go astray and compromise themselves by misguided behaviors and ideas. In the Gospel we find a detailed procedure for correcting others and ending conflicts. The reason for the necessity of such correction lies in maintaining the unity of the community, because in that unity God's will is revealed and Jesus's presence is embodied. Bringing others to repentance through correction of harmful behaviors is, therefore, not an option but an essential part of being a Christian. Such practices, called "fraternal correction" - correcting others in the spirit of compassion - aim to improve the quality of individual life and protect the unity and integrity of the community. The psalmist recognized this necessity well, when he followed his call to worship God with a warning against obstinacy and rebelliousness saying "O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness."

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

On September 4, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI, during the Sunday Angelus at the courtyard of the Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo, said, " ...If my brother

commits a sin against me I must treat him charitably and first of all, speak to him privately, pointing out that what he has said or done is wrong. This approach is known as 'fraternal correction': it is not a reaction to the offence suffered but is motivated by love for one's brethren."

The pope further quoted St. Augustine to buttress his elucidation of fraternal correction - "Whoever has offended you, in offending you has inflicted a serious injury upon himself; and would you not care for a brother's injury?... You must forget the offence you have received but not the injury of one of your brethren."

Different people react differently to wrongdoings. There are some people who choose to be silent when they see something go wrong. These are spectators and not active participants in the drama of life. Others prefer to talk about what they have seen, but they do so with everyone except the person at the center of the act of misdemeanor. These are the gossips. They always have something to say about brother A or sister B. Even those who bring to the attention of an offender what they have seen or heard, some choose to attack rather than bring healing to an injured brother or sister. However, there are some who are not mere spectators, gossips or attackers. Upon seeing a brother or sister trapped in an inferno, they would run into the fire, break the door and help bring out the victim.

These are the 'keepers of the brethren'. There is an African proverb which says, "When one hut goes in flames, it is the whole village that has been set on fire." Wrongdoing, even if it is not directed at us personally, is offensive, and when an offence is not appropriately addressed, sooner or later it becomes an obstacle that would cause many to trip and sprawl on the floor.

Against this backdrop, we can understand the call of Ezekiel to be a "watchman". His role as a watchman was to ensure that evil would not overwhelm and annihilate his brothers and sisters in the community. The concern that the prophet Ezekiel was called upon to exhibit is further exemplified in the first verse of the Gospel – "If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone, between your two selves..." This is love in action. Love for one another, according to Paul, is "the only thing you should owe to anyone."

The Church has rightly been described as "a hospital for sinners and not a museum for saints". The Church is made up of wounded men and women who are being treated for various ailments. The wounds of some members may be repugnant but such people need help not condemnation. If the help we offer them personally does not help, the Gospel text encourages us to bring on board one or two others. If this too is not sufficient, the whole community is to be called upon to help. It

is only when the wounded brother or sister has shown clearly that he is unwilling to be helped that the text commands us to "treat him like a gentile or tax collector." Perhaps, this is to ensure that the infections of an untreated wound do not infect others.

The inseparable friends in "The Three Musketeers" (originally a novel by Alexandre Dumas) have as their motto, "All for one, one for all." Inherent in this motto is a certain sense of readiness to be there for one another. A beautiful skyscraper, a termite hill or a group of fishermen hauling a net full of fish is an efficacious reminder of the power of a healthy community. Great things happen in places where the spirit of oneness is fostered.

PROVERB

"When one hut goes in flames, it is the whole village that has been set on fire."

ACTION

Self-examination:

Have I deliberately closed my eyes to wrongdoing in my family or community?

Is my own way of life a scandal to others?

What is my response to corrections received from those who care about me?

Response to God:

We cannot bring the desired change in our world when we have not succeeded in bringing change to our own personal lives. Let us assiduously work on the defects in our own lives. This would make us more tolerant in dealing with others and correct fraternally those who err.

Response to your World:

Is there something that we as a group can do to help address some of the challenges we see in the lives of those we live with?

PRAYER

*Almighty God,
we pray for all communities
that have been wounded
by divisions and individuals
who feel alienated
by their community
on account of wrongdoing.
May your waters of peace
quench the flames of evil
that seek to destroy
the lives of your people
and foster in them
a sense of oneness
and wholeness.
Amen.*