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Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ezekiel 33:7-9

Psalms 95

Romans 13:8-10

Matthew 18:15-20

"Do I have a deal for you! Do this, and you've got it made for life! No more debts to anyone for anything!" That's Paul's pitch to the Romans this week. All we have to do, he says, is love one another. The hitch is that that's a job description that requires our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, and every minute of our time. That's all. (Except for the grace necessary to accomplish it — and that comes from God through the community.) In case Paul wasn't explicit enough, today's other readings talk specifically about the love required by our prophetic vocation to be reconcilers.

The Lord told Ezekiel: "I have appointed you watchman for the house of Israel." It would be one thing if that simply meant that Ezekiel was to tattle on the people. That conversation could have stayed between God and him, leaving God to handle the consequences. Ezekiel could also have taken the watchman role as the license to gossip, telling everybody but the perpetrators how bad the bad guys were. But, no, his role was to speak directly to the offenders. We can well imagine that Ezekiel didn't expect that to make him Mr. Popularity.

The prophetic vocation is one way of understanding what Paul was calling the Romans to do. Prophets are called to make profound love of God and neighbor the underpinning of their everyday activities. Prophets have to love God in a way that leads them to listen so deeply that they share God's heart. Prophets must also love others enough to risk their own comfort and even their well-being on behalf of all of them. They show their love for the oppressed by speaking out for them; they act on their love for the oppressors by calling them to conversion.

Today's Gospel speaks of how to achieve reconciliation within the community. Jesus is not simply offering a mediation technique; he is teaching the community how

dealing with their dissensions can deepen their integrity and participation in his mission.

Jesus presents a four-step methodology for dealing with an offender. In step one, the offended person simply seeks out the other to explain what is wrong, hoping to restore the relationship. If that does not succeed, the injured party is supposed to seek others to help in the process of restoring communal peace. If a few who agree on that goal still don't achieve it, then the entire community is called to make a prophetic statement about the problem. If the community's assessment goes unheeded, then Jesus says they should treat the offender "as you would a Gentile or a tax collector."

Note: Jesus didn't tell them to punish, shun or excommunicate the person, but to treat him or her like someone who has not yet made a commitment to the Gospel, somebody Jesus would love to have dinner with. The community's approach to this person is no longer to seek reconciliation but to evangelize.

This entire process demands a great deal of the community. From the first step, the person who was offended has been struggling, reaching out in order to bring back someone who has lost the way. The victim has become identified with Christ, not focusing on personal injury, but focusing on saving the other. The injured party and the community are seeking the restoration of the offender's integrity, interpreting the offense as a betrayal of commitment to the Gospel. The person who was offended has taken up Ezekiel's role as a watchman and, with the community, is speaking a prophetic message. They are not seeking punishment, but striving for the common good.

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common good.

At first glance, Jesus' teaching about how to handle offenses in the community seems practical, even if it demands more forthrightness than we normally want. (There's a serious risk that the other two I talk to or the church community won't see it my way!) When we consider it more deeply, we see that it reflects Paul's teaching that we "owe nothing to anyone except to love one another." The commitment to unity in the community, the commitment to the common good, becomes a blank check, an open-ended commitment.

The last lines of today's Gospel offer challenge and reassurance. The challenge is to genuine communal discernment. When two or three sincerely desire the reconciliation of a straying member, when they become as open as possible to understanding the will of God, Jesus promises to be with them as they seek the truth. That means that when we are seeking reconciliation, when we gather as community to read the signs of the times, we can count on the real presence of Christ among us. Then, we will be able to discern how to love one another and live as the prophets our world needs.

[Mary M. McGlone, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, is currently writing the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the U.S.]

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