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“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.

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.

EZEKIEL 33:7-9

This short reading from Ezekiel offers a quick reminder of why nobody with good sense would aspire to be a prophet. God addresses Ezekiel and describes the prophetic vocation like that of a watchman, a sentinel who has to keep alert, not just for the neighborhood or town, but for the entire house of Israel. That means that the prophet has to pay attention to everybody and what they are doing.

Then, if God decides that someone should be reprimanded, the prophet is duty-bound to deliver the warning or else he will suffer whatever was due to the sinners he didn’t call out. The prophet inherits a terrible dilemma: either speak out or bear the responsibility for the evil actions of others. Since people generally react very badly to being told that they have to change, the poor prophet’s only choice seems to be whether to suffer now or later. Either way, the future looks dim. There is the outside chance that the people will actually listen and change their ways. That’s a win-win situation that the experienced prophet doesn’t often expect. (Of course, we can remember the prophet Jonah who actually pouted when the people repented and God relented — but, that’s another story.)

As we saw last week with Jeremiah, when prophets allow the word of God to inhabit them, it changes them. They have been influenced by God in the sense that God’s word begins to flow through them, and they will never be the same. As they say of young adults who have served in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, they are ruined for life. They can never be comfortably complacent or facilely turn a blind eye to injustice and suffering. They will never again be able to stand by in innocent passivity while

others set off on the road to perdition.

One of the conclusions we can draw from Ezekiel's predicament is that the prophet really has to be a man or woman of God. The only way to have what it takes to carry through in the vocation to prophecy is to develop a profound love of God and of God's people, and a desire to bring them together.

ROMANS 13:8-10

Paul's message to the Romans provides a fitting follow-up to Ezekiel. Ezekiel was called to be a prophet, a watchman, the one who would cry out a warning to those about to lose themselves in their own egoism. When Paul says that we owe nothing to anyone except love, prophetic action on behalf of others is surely included as an element of that love.

This selection from Romans may be one of the most succinct summaries of Christian morality we can hope to find. Augustine said it in another way when he preached "love and do what you will" (Sermon on 1 John 4). Both of these echo Jesus' teaching that love of God and neighbor summarize the law and the prophets.

One of the notable things about Paul's instruction on love is that he puts no limits on it. "Owe nothing to anyone." He isn't simply referring to the community at hand, to the Jews, to friends or enemies, but to absolutely everyone, including the stranger you have never met, but read about in the newspaper.

The word Paul uses for this love is usually written as *agape*. That's a different love from what the Greek language calls *eros*, the relationship of lovers. It's also distinct from *philia*, the love of friendship and family. In the first place, *agape* describes God's love for humanity. *Agape* describes a non-self-interested, whole-hearted, generous desire for and commitment to the good of another. Taken in that sense, such love implies immensely more than what a minimalist might find in Paul's injunction to do no evil to the neighbor.

Although affection may be a part of it, *agape* is not essentially emotional. Rather than springing from the simple spontaneity of feeling, *agape* requires decision, a commitment to hold others in high regard, to recognize others' importance and value. The love described as *agape* involves an ongoing process. It requires an awareness of others. That awareness will necessarily lead to knowledge of their

needs. That knowledge will in turn demand a response.

Michel Quoist, a French priest-poet of the 20th century, expressed the cost of agape in a prayerful reflection he began by asking, “Lord, why did you tell me to love all men, my brothers?” The prayer goes on to explain that once he opened the door to one, it was inevitably open to everyone. As he comes to the end of his prayer he protests: “I don’t belong to myself any longer. There’s no more room for me.” As a postscript to his reflection, Quoist gives God’s response to his prayer: “Don’t worry, you have gained all. While men came in to you, I, your Father, I, your God, slipped in among them.”

When Paul talks about loving one another, he’s not calling for a sentimental Hallmark moment. As Quoist’s prayer / poem explains, loving is costly business. It is also the only way to unite with God. Paul could have been more forthright and said: “Owe nothing to anyone except to love. That will cost you absolutely everything ... and give you even more.”

MATTHEW 18:15-20

The Lectionary cycle skips over a good amount of Matthew’s Gospel between last week and today. When we approach today’s Gospel it helps to see it in its context. The section beginning at Chapter 18 opens with disciples asking Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. They were certainly not expecting him to put a little child in the middle of their debate circle, making her or him the center of attention. Perhaps it was the child’s amazement at being singled out by the area’s most famous adult that made Jesus say that anyone who wants to understand the kingdom has to be ready to be just that surprised. From there, Jesus went on to warn the disciples never to lead one of the innocents into sin. He added that they should detach themselves completely from causes of sin — even if it required an amputation! (Matthew 18:8-9). Then, in a quick turn-around, he went on to say that, if one of the community started to drift, they should do everything possible to seek and bring him or her back, just like a shepherd would search for a lost lamb.

Having broached the topic of community, he talked about how to settle the problems that would inevitably arise among them. With this, Jesus touches back into the idea of prophecy, but he’s brought it directly home to the little group closest to him and to one another.

Jesus wasn't simply presenting a problem-solving technique, although it is a good methodology even before we understand its theology. For step one, Jesus starts out by setting the stage like this: "If your brother sins against you. . ." The situation is clear, one person in the community feels injured and thinks that the other has done something wrong. A lot of people in that situation will start out by complaining, not to the person with whom they have a grievance, but with anybody they think will listen and agree with them.

The approach Jesus counsels feels much riskier because it requires honest dialogue and avoids amassing a team of supporters who will have been swayed by one side of the story. Following Jesus' methodology, the more serious the grievance, the more the injured party will be acting like a good shepherd trying to bring back one who is deviating from promoting the common good.

Step Two: If an honest attempt to dialogue comes to an impasse, the person who has taken on the role of shepherd needs to engage companions to help in the process. Now, the two or three who go together must remember that their goal is to win over the other, to restore the community.

Step Three: If the efforts of a few are unsuccessful, the case needs to be brought to the community as a whole. Remembering the goal is crucial in this process. The aim is always to restore the offender to integrity in the community. Throughout the process, all the participants will be called upon to examine their own integrity and commitment to the common good. Thus, in Jesus' methodology, seeking the lost becomes an intense exercise in deepening communal bonds.

Finally, Jesus says that if the community cannot bring someone back into union, they are to treat that one as "a Gentile or a tax collector." Note that he didn't say to treat the person as an adversary, but rather as one who has not yet received the message of the kingdom.

That understanding gives a context to Jesus' final saying. Who are the two or three of whom he speaks? They are the ones who are seeking the common good. The risen Christ promises that they never need do that alone.

Planning: 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's readings seem like a follow up to last week's texts. The first reading speaks of the responsibility of the prophet even more directly than last week's lament from Jeremiah. This passage is well matched with today's Gospel, which calls for fraternal correction. The second reading reminds us that any such correction must be motivated and surrounded by our love for our brother or sister.

This Gospel is likely a challenging one for most of us. It is very hard to confront a family member or friend or co-worker or neighbor to urge them to change their behavior. It's hard, first of all, to clearly discern when such intervention is appropriate and necessary. No one wants to become known as a busybody pushing himself or herself into other people's business. And it's hard to know when such correction has a chance of being successful. Many times it may simply reinforce bad behavior because we all tend to be defensive when corrected.

Yet, the words of the Lord still stand: "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."

Most of the time we are not dealing with such drastic and clear-cut situations as death, but we are often in situations that call for correction. Planners might consider practices or customs in the liturgy that really are not in accord with the shape of the ritual or its purpose.

Do many parishioners regularly show up late for Mass? Sometimes, that is due to unavoidable circumstances, but often it's a sign that the liturgy is not a high priority. Can you find ways to gently urge such folks to reconsider their pre-Mass timing? Many also leave Mass early; can that habit be challenged by urging concern for the community and the importance of taking the whole ritual seriously?

Many parishioners do not even attempt to sing the Communion song during the Communion procession. Can you teach them the reasons that the ritual calls for all to sing until the procession ends and only then sit or kneel for silent prayer?

Sometimes children are allowed to play throughout the liturgy, both disturbing those around them and ignoring the Mass completely. Can you be understanding about the challenges of parenting at Mass and still urge parents to train their children from their early years to pay attention to what is happening at Mass?

What other behaviors do you see at your parish liturgies that need correction? How can you work with presiders and preachers to improve the way your community worships?

Prayers: 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Conflicts are often hard to resolve and can be even more challenging in the church. Scripture tells us that this has always been true. Today, conflicts are often subject to immediate publicity and the process of healing may be harder than ever. But today's readings confirm that the ultimate root of reconciliation is always the same. If we love and respect one another, the steps to healing are made possible ... even easier.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you showed the disciples how to reconcile with one another: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you taught them about love and respect: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to heal our divisions in the same way: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider My friends, let us pray for all who are in need of reconciliation with one another.

Minister For the whole church: That it may be a model of true healing and reconciliation ... we pray,

- For the resolution of conflicts between and among the world's nations; and for those who mediate international conflicts ... we pray,
- For those situations in which reconciliation seems impossible, or wherever conflict leads to hatred, violence or war ... we pray,
- For those whose lives are altered because of conflict, especially among children and families ... we pray,
- For those unwilling to reconcile with others, and for those who do not know how...we pray,
- For those who glorify conflict or use it to promote themselves ... we pray,
- For any conflicts that need to be resolved in this community ... we pray,
- For all among us who are suffering, especially the poor, the sick and the dying; and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

Presider God of healing, we come as people often needing to make peace with one another. Help us to remember that peace is possible when hearts are open to love. Show us how to be peacemakers in a world in need of healing. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the great healer. Amen.

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