Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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"Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another." Sure, we'll take care of that this morning and then this afternoon we'll take a stroll on top of the lake, OK?

Paul used the word "owe." But who has ever thought about love as a debt? We usually think of loving others as a kind and joyful response to those close to us and a hard-won virtue to practice with people who are disagreeable or antagonistic. Love of others, especially an enemy, seems like the greatest, most costly gift we can give.

Paul would say that acting as if loving were a choice and not an obligation gives us an address in the distant suburbs of God's reign. He says we owe love to one another. As Pope Francis used to say, "*Todos, todos, todos*!"

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 6, 2026

Ezekiel 33:7-9
Psalm 95
Romans 13:8-10
Matthew 18:15-20

Ezekiel heard the description of his appointment as a prophet as a command to love his people by telling them what he heard from God. God explained, "You only have to listen to everything I say and tell the people exactly what I think of the way they are acting. Oh yeah, and be very attentive, because if you don't explain how I view the world and what I expect, you'll be responsible for everything that goes wrong among them." God was ordering Ezekiel to love everyone, most especially those who were doing harm to the community.

When Ezekiel was a novice prophet, God described his mission in less than promising terms. God sent him to stubborn, obstinate rebels and said, "Don't be afraid ... though you find yourself surrounded with brambles and sitting on scorpions" (Ezekiel 2).

God gave Ezekiel the mission to love everyone by letting them know where they were going wrong. God commissioned him to be a watchman, not as God's cop, but as a protector of the community, to keep them from destroying themselves.

In an oft-quoted bit of wisdom from the film "The Godfather," we hear, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer." That's a distorted version of what Paul and Jesus tell us this week. In effect, the two of them say, "Love your own well and give your all for those who make themselves your enemies." That's a tall order.

In this week's Gospel, Jesus talks about forgiveness as not so much an act of pardon, but as a mission. For Jesus, the mission of forgiveness begins, as he himself began, by reaching out to the lost.

According to Jesus, when a community member offends, be it harming an individual or the community, a disciple is commissioned to seek that person out as a friend, perhaps a dinner companion. The whole point of going to the offender is to win him or her over. That's an act of inclusion in the model of the father of the prodigal son, who ran to embrace and welcome his derelict child.

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Jesus outlines a four-step process to win back an offender. First, a one-to-one approach. If that doesn't work, engage a few people — which entails the risk that they may not share your point of view and therefore implies that you, too, may be called to a new attitude, not just the other person.

If there is no resolution with a few, then ask the "church," the gathered community, to enter into the process. Finally, if that doesn't work, treat the offender as a gentile or tax collector.

What does it mean to treat them like that? Jesus described his mission as one of inviting sinners into the fold (Matthew 9:13). By the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, gentiles were joining the Christian community; they were the primary recipients of Paul's ministry. Thus, to treat people like gentiles or tax collectors meant that the community regarded them as people to be invited in. Even if their previous way of acting was not within community values, they were invited into communion to share communal life.

Jesus was famous for his preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, so much so that he expected his disciples to be like them. In this teaching, he calls disciples to heroic greatness. He tells them that when someone hurts you, cheats or steals from you, ruins your reputation, or undermines or betrays the community, your vocation

mandates you to try to win that person back.

He invites us to do the same. This is the paschal mystery, the call to give ourselves for others, to act in memory of Jesus by being the least, working on behalf of those who do harm and offering forgiveness.

It's not walking on water. It's a solid and demanding path to expanding communion in our world.