

Homily for September 5, 1999
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

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

We need God's help to correct our faults.

Community life, whether in a family, intentional groupings, religious congregations, or the Church itself, is the great testing ground of faith. St. Teresa of Avila felt that relationships in community were often a greater indication of one's relationship to God than the heights of mystical prayer. An activist like Dorothy Day was wise enough to see that injustice and exploitation were as present in small service communities as in political empires. Jean Vanier, as committed to marginal people as anyone might be, has often observed that it takes greater charity and humility to get along with a co-laborer than with a handicapped stranger.

And in Matthew 18 Jesus says, "If your brother should commit some wrong against you, go and point out his fault, but keep it between the two of you...if he does not listen, summon another, so that every case may stand on the word of two or three witnesses."

Only after these careful encounters is the conflict to be referred to the entire church. Then, if resistance persists, there is separation.

Notice what the Gospel does not say. It does not say, "If your brother sins, go and moan and groan to everybody else about it behind his back, exaggerating it for dramatic effect." It does not say, "If your brother sins, go immediately and denounce him to the authorities and demand to know what they are going to do about it." It does not say, "If your brother sins, sue him for every penny he's got." The clear objective here is the correction and reconciliation of the sinner, not their downfall and humiliation. Even when used dramatically in the Middle Ages, excommunication had as its purpose, not permanent exclusion, but to bring the person back to the fold.

It all ends up being messy and disconcerting – this business of correcting one another's faults. There are no pat answers. Even today's gospel really doesn't give us any. This passage is actually sandwiched between the parables of the lost sheep and the unforgiving servant. This gospel has no parallel in either St. Mark or St. Luke. Perhaps it needs to be seen in light of two other passages occurring only in St. Matthew: the parable of the weeds and the wheat and the parable of the dragnet – these suggest leaving the

“sinner” in the community to let God sort it out at the harvest, when the net is at last dragged to the shore.

Sounds simple enough – this business of correction. The problem is, it depends upon behaviors that do not come easily. We don’t often enjoy directly confronting another person, especially someone with whom we are having difficulties. Some families will go years before addressing a problem – some never do. Grudges or resentments within a community will often die with those who hold them rather than come to resolution and quiet conversation. Misdeeds of friends or relatives are usually discussed with anyone but the accused.

Encountering the truth with another person scares us because it makes us face another being who cannot be reduced to our own desires or projections. We may try to make others tools for our use, but it fails. Rather than enter the struggle, we ignore it.

But, however, if we seriously love another person for who they are, and not as a mere instrument of our will, we begin to experience the kind of self-forgetfulness that is required in our relationship to God. Our human relationships mirror our relationship with God – their degree of honesty is how we stand with God. Whenever we encounter each other – not only in prayer – Jesus is in our midst.

Truly, the holy food we share is nourishment for us to discover the Body of Christ we become here.

What might have happened differently at Columbine High School in Littleton if every student’s unhealthy or destructive behavior had been confronted and the community had tried to love each one, correct each one, hold each one responsible for his actions?

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