

September 10, 2017
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mt 18:15-20

[Jesus said to the disciples] 15 "If your brother sins (against you), go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. 16 If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.



18 Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, (amen,) I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. 20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Background

The last two weeks the gospels have focused on an occasion that was a turning point for both Jesus and for the disciples. Two weeks ago, Jesus asked the disciples who they believed he was. Peter spoke up saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16) Last week, Jesus told the disciples that his role as Messiah would mean suffering, rejection and death. Peter again spoke up and expressed his hope that Jesus would be spared such a fate. After correcting Peter with verbal force, Jesus also instructed them all that if they were to be his followers, they too must be willing to lose their lives. Last week's text ended the 16th chapter of Matthew's gospel.

The gospel for this week is taken from the 18th chapter of Matthew's text. The church, in choosing texts for our reflection at Sunday Masses, has decided to skip the entire 17th chapter and the first 14 verses of the 18th chapter at this point in the liturgical year. If time permits, it may be helpful to read those verses on your own. For those who do not have the opportunity to read the text that will be skipped in the Sunday Lectionary, here is a list of the events that Matthew describes in those verses.

The Transfiguration of Jesus

Jesus' instruction regarding the coming of Elijah

The healing of a boy who is possessed by a demon

A second prediction of Jesus' suffering and death

Jesus being questioned about paying the temple tax

Jesus teaching the disciples that the greatest in the realm of God is like a little child

A stern warning to those who would lead a child into sin

The parable of the lost sheep

The last two teachings of Jesus in the above list draw attention to Jesus' concern for the lost. They provide the backdrop for the instruction to the disciples in the text for this week.

Jesus lived in a culture where allegiance to family and honor were deeply-held values. In this society, conflict could easily escalate into violence. Therefore, there was a real need to deal with any conflicts that might arise as quickly and privately as possible. Once a transgression reached the public forum, it became a matter of honor for one to demand restitution or inflict similar or greater damage. The motivation in the gospel is, clearly, to reach out in compassion in a way that does not draw attention or embarrassment to the person who feels they have been offended.

Jesus' instruction puts the responsibility for taking action on the one who experienced a perceived offense. The obvious omission is the determination of who is the true source of the offense. That does not seem to be the issue for Jesus. Restoring the relationship, and avoiding violence that can be passed on from one generation to the next, is the focus.

Typically, in this culture, disagreements were not settled by logic or by a convincing line of reasoning, but rather by the number and status of those who could be gathered to support one's point of view. Therefore, if the private and personal approach did not restore the relationship, then one used other means that were part of the culture, like getting others, and, if needed, the church involved. If that was unsuccessful, the person lost their relationship with the community. They were treated as a non-member of the community or as a traitor. While this may sound harsh in the world in which most contemporary western Christians live, in a culture like Jesus' where conflicts could easily lead to violence and death, treating another as lost or cut off is comparatively mild.

The second part of the text stresses the responsibility that the community played in reaching out to the lost and alienated of the community. What was bound on earth by those disciples of Jesus was bound in heaven. Those who failed to maintain their relationship, or refused to be reconciled, would also find it so in heaven. Nowhere in the instruction does it indicate that this admonition is meant just for the apostles or for those who exercise roles of leadership. It is addressed to all the disciples.

Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever been aware that your actions or words could lead to bloodshed and/or death? What do you think it would be like to live in that kind of situation? Can you think of people who do live in that kind of fear even today?
2. Have you ever had to stop associating with a person because of the potential physical or moral damage that might occur to yourself or another if the relationship continued?
3. Do you know people who have forgiven another's insults or violence? How does that affect them? What have you learned from them?
4. Do you also know people who have been unable to forgive another? How does that affect them?
5. To what extent have you reached out to another in order to save a relationship? Has it been worth it?
6. What is the most challenging part of this gospel text for you?
7. What is the most encouraging part of this gospel text for you?
8. Can you talk to God about your desire to be a person who seeks to bring reconciliation whenever the possibility of harm arises in your relationships?

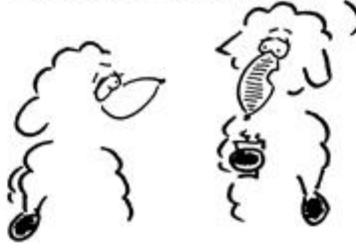
The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM.

They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel.

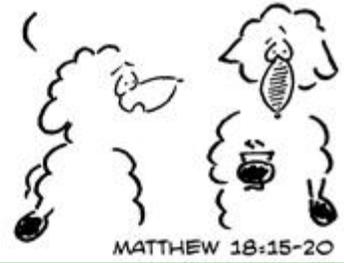
FOLLOWING JESUS' INSTRUCTION IN MATTHEW 18 IS HARD FOR ME. I'M A CONFLICT AVOIDER.



DOES IT HELP TO THINK OF THAT WORK AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD SEEKING THE LOST SHEEP IN VERSE 12?



NOT REALLY, CAUSE THEN I CAN'T **YELL** AT THEM!



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