

Dear Friends,

A story is told about a Roman nobleman who died, leaving enormous debts that he had successfully concealed during his lifetime. When the estate was put up for auction, Caesar Augustus instructed his agent to buy the man's pillow. When some expressed surprise at the order, he explained, "That pillow must be particularly conducive to sleep, if its late owner, in spite of all his debts, could sleep on it."

While this little story might make us laugh, being in debt is a serious affair. It creates stress and leaves many people feeling vulnerable and afraid. Few of us with any sense of responsibility would be able to sleep well at night if we were in serious financial debt. We might also find it emotionally and spiritually difficult if we owe a debt of forgiveness and healing to another person.

Ezekiel, in the first reading of today, gives us the typical image of an Old Testament prophet and preacher. He warns his listeners about sin and judgment, and brings their attention to the wickedness around them. Throughout the Old Testament we can see many times that the prophets offer harsh judgments against the people of Israel as they stray from the path God has laid out for them. In essence, what the God of Israel wants is for all to be saved and return to the path of goodness and right.

Matthew speaks in today's Gospel of how we might win back our brother or sister, should there be a conflict between us. Matthew is offering us a path to reconciliation and healing. In reality, we will all, at one time or another, be in disagreement with others, and possibly with family members. Matthew offers an opportunity to find a different and better way of healing and forgiveness.

The threat the prophet Ezekiel speaks of is not external. It is internal. This call to healing and forgiveness is a personal call to each one of us. It is an invitation to look inwards and to seek what separates us from the love of God and our neighbor. Likewise when Paul invites us to take on the "debt of mutual love," we might ask: how can we do this? The answer could be found in the first letter of Paul to Corinthians. Here Paul advises them that "Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes. Love does not come to an end."

Such an attitude of love is surely the backdrop to approaching those who hurt or wrong us. If we live from these principles of love, we will desire not only our own healing, but also a restoration of our relationship with our brother or sister. In seeking to live out the message of our readings today, we might ask ourselves: what do we do when we see someone straying from the path of faith? Do we shrug our shoulders and say, "That's their choice," or do we try to win them back with love and understanding? Equally, what do we do when we are hurt by someone close to us? Do we ruminate on the hurt done to us, or do we seek to win back those who have hurt us by adopting a loving approach? As "love is the one thing that cannot hurt our neighbor," let us try to be more loving and to offer words of love and healing to those we meet this week.

Your friend in Jesus
Msgr. Zach