

Twenty Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 17, 2017

If you saw your young child about to put his or her hand on a hot stove, wouldn't you move quickly to prevent him or her from being burned? Or if that same child got hold of your prescription medicine, you'd certainly act just as quickly to prevent a terrible accident.

There are countless other occasions when we see someone hurt or in danger or on the brink of a misfortune and we step up to help. If we can extend our care to others in all these instances of physical, emotional or psychological need, why are we so reluctant to do the same with regard to sin?

Our first reading from Sirach tells us that our responsibility for one another requires us to warn each other so as to "dissuade the wicked" from their ways. If we fail to do so, says the prophet, then we are culpable. God made us to be responsible for one another.

Then in our second reading St. Paul reminds us of our mutual "debt." We are to love one another. We "owe" this to one another because in loving, we fulfill the law. Because of our love for one another, we help one another to avoid sin and do what is right.

In our Gospel reading Jesus speaks to us as one who was well acquainted with conflict. Remember all of the times He came into conflict with the Pharisees, Saducees and scribes? There was also plenty of conflict within his group of disciples and family.

He knew that disputes would arise, feelings would be hurt, and resentments and misunderstandings would diminish the work of building up the Kingdom of God. So He offered His disciples and us four principles to deal with conflict and resentments.

The first principle is that the offended party should take the initiative. And this first step is probably the hardest.

Remember that even though we've all offended God by sinning against His love, it was He who took the initiative; He made the first move towards reconciliation by sending His Son to reconcile the world to himself.

But far too often we fail to take this first and most important step. Usually it's a lot easier fall into the trap of chattering behind the backs of those who have offended us. We might be tempted to go to friends and complain. We throw up walls of protection and put the offending party into a deep and freezing silence by giving them the "cold shoulder." We build defenses around our souls where we can nurse and build up our resentments and then call ourselves victims.

Suppose, though, that one-on-one reconciliation doesn't work out. Jesus tells us to then take the matter to a trusted third party.

Not only can this be very healing for ourselves, it can also bring objectivity and fairness to the conflict while at the same time bringing it out of the swamp of emotional subjectivity.

You see, hurt feelings and old resentments distort our vision and make it impossible to see things as they really were are. And then pride works its evil in our hearts and souls. Bringing in a third party, someone who has a gift for understanding and impartiality, can bring about real reconciliation.

Jesus then tells us that if that doesn't work, to then bring the matter to the church. That doesn't necessarily mean calling up the priest to settle the dispute...that really belongs to the second step.

What it does mean is that the dispute can be resolved in an atmosphere of Christian prayer and Christian fellowship. It's understood that while meeting in the community, it's not judgment, but fraternal love that creates transformation and conversion.

And if all of that fails, then Jesus tells us to "treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector." "Oh boy", we might be thinking; "now we can throw the bum out!" Well, not quite so fast.

The question we need to answer is: "How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?"

And then how do we use *that* answer to approach those with whom we live in conflict? How we answer those two questions touches on the core of what it means to live as a Christian, what it means to live and love as Jesus did.

The role of the Church in situations of conflict depends on our remembering that the primary ministry of Jesus was the ministry of reconciliation. To be a Christian is to live in that ministry of reconciliation, forgiveness and healing. Forgiveness and healing doesn't say that there is no sin. It doesn't excuse hurt or sin. It does promote healing.

Each of our readings from Scripture today tell us that as disciples we are called to be strong, loving and wise. Not just strong. Christ didn't come so we can use him to attack others. He came so we can lead the world to him. Remember what we heard in today's Gospel.

The instructions to the community were to lead the offending Christian back into the heart of the community with love. Nowhere is there an instruction to assault him or insult him. There's nothing Christian about those who use Christ to attack others.

Instead, Christ calls each of us to make every effort to win over those with who we are in conflict by tapping into the freely given grace and power of God's healing love and wisdom.

Forgiveness is the way in which we are liberated from the ways of this world; it takes us into the very heart of God. To forgive is truly divine, and the presence of God is something we all desperately need in our lives, particularly in these days that are filled with anger, fear and mistrust.