

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time + 10 September 2023 + Ezek 33 + Rom 13 + Mt 18

Today's readings give us the opportunity to tackle one of the biggest misunderstandings about Jesus in society and even in the Church today regarding the whole idea of judging others. We live in a time the only remaining sin that American society seems to recognize is being judgmental. Society doesn't know much scripture; but the one scripture that everyone seems to know by heart is this: *judge not lest you be judged*. And so before we can understand today's readings, let's first look at Matthew chapter 7, where we hear that often-quoted *judge not*. Jesus immediately goes on to say: *How can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove that splinter from your eye,' while the wooden beam is in your eye? You hypocrite, remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother's eye.*

In other words, make sure you have the pure vision of Christ before you judge someone else, because Christ will judge you too! But, notice that Jesus never says, *don't remove the splinter from your brother's eye at all, after all, who's to say what is bad for the eye!* The easiest thing in this situation would be to ignore both his splinter *and* your beam. But the *loving* thing to do would be to remove both, starting, of course, with your own beam. And that's why I don't think we run the risk of turning into a judgmental people by following Jesus' teachings today; because personal *and* fraternal correction is really hard! But as our 1st reading today from the prophet Ezekiel reminds us, it is a spiritual work of mercy to confront a sinner with his sin, so long as we go about it correctly and lovingly, which is exactly what Jesus teaches us to do in our Gospel today.

So now let's get back to today's Gospel. Jesus begins his instruction by framing the issue: *If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone*. Each detail is important here. First, notice that the context is when a *brother* sins. Now 'brother' here is probably not to be taken literally, as the Greek word here has a broad range of meanings, from blood-sibling to any fellow countryman. In our Gospel, the most likely meaning is a fellow believer in the Lord Jesus Christ—a member of the Church. And this is key: our focus here is on correcting those sinners with whom we have some kind of prior relationship. If you go up to someone you hardly know and chastise her for this-or-that sin, you will not get very far. This, by the way, is why online arguments are most often completely fruitless!

Next, we are talking about when a brother *sins*. I should also note here that Jesus is talking about serious, major sins; not minor annoyances. And as I mentioned earlier, contrary to popular belief today, we *can* know what sin is. God has clearly taught us what is contrary to His path of love and life through Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, such as the commandments we hear in our 2nd reading today from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. Morality is not based on our 'feelings' nor on majority vote, but on God's eternal law. So

yes, we can judge manifest *actions*, and determine if they are sins, even though we cannot judge our brother's *intentions* or his soul before God. Again, God is the ultimate judge.

Jesus goes on to instruct: *go and tell him his fault between you and him alone*. Jesus doesn't say '*go and talk about him behind his back*', or '*go say nasty things about him on Twitter*'. No, at first, just keep it between the two of you, or you too may fall into the sin of detraction. After you have confronted the sinner, Jesus says, *If he listens to you, you have won over your brother*. And this is absolutely fundamental to what He is teaching here. Before you begin this process of fraternal correction, you must check your motives. If your motive is: for revenge, to display your moral superiority, or to win an argument, and not simply for the good of your brother's soul before God, then stop and do not proceed! Without pure motives, you will not win your brother over, and you run the risk of falling in to sin yourself. This means we need to pray mightily before embarking upon fraternal correction.

But let's take this one step further. As I mentioned, 'brother' here likely means another believer in Christ. What makes fraternal correction so difficult today is that many people claim to be Catholic, but then invent their own rules for what this means. Typically this means that they pick and choose which of the 10 Commandments or the Precepts of the Church they will follow, and so they are unlikely to listen to you. So then what do you do?

Well, Jesus says, *gather one or two along with you*. Again, the same standards that we mentioned earlier apply to them as well. And if this intervention doesn't work, bring it before *the Church*. Interestingly, now for the second time in St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus reaffirms the power of the Church to exercise authority over Her members. And this is serious authority: God himself will bind the decisions that Church authorities make. This is also the basis for our teaching on excommunication. Excommunication is rare these days; some say it should be used more. Even if this is true, excommunication of a sinner must be the absolute, rare, last resort, and the goal is always salvation, not punishment.

Finally, you may be thinking, *this is all interesting, but is anyone ever really going to do this?* Well, if Jesus taught it, then we can't just "write it off" because it is hard. But even more, I think it is very applicable to our lives today, especially for parents, grandparents, and godparents, who are trying to truly love their children in a godless society. For example, I have a long-time acquaintance who decided to live with his girlfriend before they were married. And so his mother told him, *Son, I will always love you, but I have to tell you that what you are doing is wrong before God*. Her motives were pure: she obviously had nothing to gain from such a difficult conversation. She had a close relationship with her son. And she raised him in Church to know better. And believe it or not, he listened to her. This kind of correction may not always effect an immediate conversion, but maybe in time it will. And at least you can have a clear conscience before God, that you tried to save a sinner. None of this is easy. But as the Cross of Christ ever reminds us, real love is never easy.