

Synopsis: OT XXIII [A] (Sept 10) Sunday Homily on Mt 18:15-20 (L/17) Fr. Tony Kadavil

Introduction: The common theme of today's readings is God's command concerning spiritual responsibility and our individual accountability for others in our families, parishes and community, which rises from our identity as God's children and hence as brothers and sisters in Christ. We are, therefore, the "keepers" of our brothers and sisters with the painful responsibility of lovingly and prudently correcting our erring brothers and sisters. This individual responsibility in a Christian society includes fraternal correction of other members and our obligation to forgive our offenders and to ask forgiveness from others for our offenses.

Scripture lessons: In the first reading, God tells Ezekiel that he is to be a "*watchman for the house of Israel*," obliged to warn Israel of moral dangers. If Ezekiel should refrain from speaking God's word intended to convert the wicked, God will hold Ezekiel responsible for the death of the wicked. In the second reading, St. Paul points out that the love we should have for one another should be our only reason for admonishing and correcting the sinner. Love seeks the good of the one who is loved. Therefore, we should admonish one another so that we all may repent and grow in holiness. In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches that true Christian charity obliges a Christian not only to assist his neighbors in their temporal and spiritual needs with material help and prayer, but also with correction and counsel for an erring brother or sister who has damaged the community by his or her public sin. If the erring one refuses a one-on-one loving correction by the offended party, then the Christian is to try to involve more people: first, "*one or two others*," and eventually "*the Church*." Finally, Jesus mentions the efficacy of community prayer in solving such problems, for Christ is present in the praying Christian community.

Life messages: 1) We are our brother's/sister's keeper. Modern believers tend to think that they have no right to intervene in the private lives of their fellow believers. Others evade the issue saying, "As a sinner, I don't have the moral courage or the right to correct anyone." But Jesus emphatically affirms that we are our brothers' keepers, and we have the serious obligation to correct others. Have we offered advice and encouragement to our friends and neighbors and coworkers when it was needed, and loving correction in private for a personal offense where that was possible?

2) Gather in Jesus' name and work miracles: Today's Gospel reminds us of the good we can do together, and of how we can do it. Jesus says, "*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*." If any group of us gather, work, and act with the Holy Spirit guiding us, we will become much more than simply the sum of our numbers. Today, Jesus makes it clear how important we are, one to another. One in Christ, our community can use God's power to make His healing, life-giving love more effective among His people.

OT XXIII [A] (Sept 10): Ez 33:7-9; Rom 13:8-10; Mt 18:15-20

Anecdote #1: "Fraulein, will you forgive me?" Corrie ten Boom often thought back over the horrors of the Ravensbruck concentration camp. How could she ever forgive the former Nazis who had been her jailers? Where was love, acceptance, and forgiveness in a horror camp where more than 95,000 women died? How could she ever forget the horrible cruelty of the guards and the smoke constantly coming from the chimney of the crematorium? Then in 1947 Corrie was speaking in a Church in Munich, and when the meeting was over she saw one of the cruellest male guards of Ravensbruck coming forward to speak to her. He had his hand outstretched. "I have become a Christian," he explained. "I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein, will you forgive me?" A conflict raged in Corrie's heart. The Spirit of God urged her to forgive. The spirit of bitterness and coldness urged her to turn away. "Jesus, help me," she prayed. Then she knew what she must do. "I can lift my hand," she thought to herself. "I can do that much." As their hands met it was as if warmth and healing broke forth with tears and joy. "I forgive you, brother, with all my heart," she said. Later Corrie testified that "it was the power of the Holy Spirit" who had poured the love of God into her heart that day. (Garrie F. Williams, *Welcome, Holy Spirit.* Copyright (c) 1994) I don't know any other way true forgiveness can take place. We turn our hurt over to God. We ask God for the ability to forgive.

#2: Marshall Tito and Bishop Sheen: In a little church in a small village, an altar boy serving the priest at Sunday Mass accidentally dropped the cruet of wine. The village priest struck the altar boy sharply on the cheek and in a gruff voice shouted, "Leave the altar and don't come back." That boy became Tito, the Communist leader. In the cathedral of a large city in another place, another altar boy serving the bishop at Sunday Mass also accidentally dropped the cruet of wine. With a warm twinkle in his eyes, the bishop gently whispered, "Someday you will be a priest." Do you know who that boy was? Archbishop Fulton Sheen. How do you deal with others who have caused problems for you? Jesus has the answer in today's Gospel: With straight talk, due process, but most of all, with grace.

3: "I must forgive": Sister Helen Prejean, in her book *Dead Man Walking*, tells the real story of Lloyd LeBlanc, a Roman Catholic layman, whose son was murdered. When he arrived in the cane field with the sheriff's deputies to identify his son David's body, LeBlanc immediately knelt by his boy's body and prayed the Lord's Prayer. When he came to the words: "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,*" he realized the depth of the commitment he was making. "Whoever did this, I must forgive them, I resolved," he later told Sr. Prejean. LeBlanc confessed that it had been difficult not to be overcome by the bitterness and feelings of revenge that welled up from time to time, especially on David's birthday. But for the rest of his life, forgiveness was prayed for and struggled for and won. He went to the execution of the culprit Patrick Sonnier, not for revenge but hoping for an apology. Before sitting in the electric chair Patrick

Sonnier, the murderer said, "Mr. Le Blanc, I want to ask your forgiveness for what I did," and Lloyd LeBlanc nodded his head, signaling forgiveness he had already given. Today's Gospel reminds us and challenges us to continue on the path to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Introduction: The common theme of today's readings is the impact of our membership in the Church on our "private" lives. Being a member of the Church means we belong to the single Body of Christ and form a community of brothers and sisters in Christ. We are, therefore, the "keepers" of our brothers and sisters, for each one of us is important to all the others in our Faith community. That is why we have to be meaningfully present to, and take responsibility for, other people. Inhuman behavior against defenseless people, like child abuse, elder abuse or spouse abuse, is something about which we need to be really concerned, to the point of taking appropriate action to protect the victims. This individual responsibility in a Christian society includes, as today's readings remind us, our responsibility for each other. Perhaps the most painful obligations of watchful love are fraternal correction and generosity in forgiving and forgetting injuries. In the first reading, God tells Ezekiel that he is to be a "*watchman for the house of Israel*," obliged to warn Israel of moral dangers. If Ezekiel should refrain from speaking God's word intended to convert the wicked, God will hold Ezekiel responsible for the death of the wicked. Today's Responsorial Psalm (Ps 95), urges sinners to hear God's Voice, not to harden their hearts, and to remember that He is the One Who made us, and the Rock of our salvation. In the second reading, St. Paul points out that the love we should have for one another should be our only reason for admonishing the sinner. Love seeks the good of the one who is loved. Therefore, we should admonish one another so that we all may repent and grow in holiness. In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches that true Christian charity obliges a Christian not only to assist his neighbors in their temporal and spiritual needs with material help and prayer, but also with correction and counsel for an erring brother or sister who has damaged the community by his or her public sin. If the erring brother refuses a one-on-one loving correction by the offended party, then the Christian is to try to involve more people: first, "*one or two others*," and eventually "*the church*." But harsh words and an aggressive attitude have no place in a Christian community. Finally, Jesus mentions the efficacy of community prayer in solving such problems, for Christ is present in the praying Christian community. The whole thrust of the passage is that we should all work towards reconciliation rather than punishment.

The first reading (Ezekiel 33:7-9): defines the role of an Old Testament prophet. The prophet is Ezekiel who was deported by Nebuchadnezzar from Jerusalem to Babylon in 597 B.C., together with King Jehoiachin of Judah (Ezekiel 1: 1-3), and most of the nobles of the country. "*You, son of man*," Yahweh proclaims, "*I have appointed you watchman for the house of Israel; when you hear Me say anything, you shall warn them for Me*." Like a watchman, the prophet exists only for the good of others, in this case, those deported from Israel to Babylon. He is to give them God's words, to challenge them and to correct them from time to time, so that if they should go wrong, the responsibility

would be theirs. Here, Ezekiel gets straightforward orders from Yahweh, assigning responsibility to him and to the people, with no *ifs*, *ands* or *buts* tolerated. As Christians, we are all God's prophets, God's representatives, God's watchmen, set on elevated places to give warning of approaching danger to our brothers and sisters. The prophets of all times have a grave responsibility for their people's salvation. None of us can retire from the task of being watchmen. As Ezekiel is appointed watchman over the house of Israel in today's first Reading, so Jesus in the Gospel today establishes His disciples as guardians of the new Israel of God, the Church (see Galatians 6:16). They have the power to bind and loose, to forgive sins and to reconcile sinners in His name (see John 20:21-23). (Scott Hann).

The second reading, (Romans 13:8-10): After finishing his treatment of doctrinal questions on Christ and our relationship to him, Paul used to write an application of the doctrine to the day-to-day behavior of the congregation receiving the letter. In today's reading, after urging the Christian converts of Rome to obey their lawful civil authorities, and after discussing the inability of the Mosaic Law to save anyone, no matter how well he may keep it, Paul adds such an application. Here Paul seems to be saying, "You still want the Law? I'll give you the real law. Love one another. That fulfills the law." If God is not known and loved, there can be no basis or motive for true love of neighbor. It is only the presence of God in each human being and the recognition of others as God's children that can form a sound basis for the love of our neighbors. In short, love is the basis of the law, and we fulfill the law by loving our neighbor. Paul reminds us that love requires that we should watch out for one another's souls, and love specifies the manner in which our watchful care of one another should be conducted.

Gospel Exegesis: Today's Gospel deals with the relationship of members of the Church to each other and highlights one of the most painful responsibilities that we have towards others, namely fraternal correction. Matthew expands a saying of Jesus, originally concerned primarily with forgiveness (compare the shorter version in Luke 17:3-4), into a four-step procedure for disciplining members in the new eschatological Community of the Church. In the seventeenth century, the great Anglican priest and poet John Donne reminded us, "*No man is an island, entire unto himself.*" In today's Gospel, Jesus instructed his disciples about relationships among members of the Church, because through Baptism we assume a serious responsibility for our fellow-believers. Suppose a son or daughter, friend or acquaintance, relative, neighbor, even parent or teacher, does "*something wrong*" to us, whether the sin is of commission or omission. By outlining a four-step process of confrontation, negotiation, adjudication and excommunication, Jesus tells us how to deal with and finally mend a broken relationship within the Christian fellowship.

1) Confrontation: The worst thing that we can do about a wrong done to us is to brood about it. Brooding can poison our whole mind and life, until we can think of nothing else but our sense of personal injury. We mustn't gossip either. Hence, the first step proposed by Jesus to the one who has been wronged is that he should go to meet

the offender in person, and point out lovingly, but in all seriousness, the harm he has done. This first stage is designed to let the two persons concerned solve the issue between them. If it works out at that level, that is the ideal situation. "*You have won back your brother.*" Abraham Lincoln said that only he has the right to criticize who has the heart to help.

2) Negotiation: Suppose the first step does not resolve the situation and the person refuses to admit wrong, continuing in a behavior bad for him or her as well as for the one he has injured. This creates a problem, for example, among young persons where a friend steals or shoplifts, uses drugs or drinks excessively, hangs around with a bad crowd, plans to run away, contemplates suicide or abortion, or just "goofs off" in school. Here, the second step is to take one or two other members of the Church along with the wronged person to speak to the wrongdoer and to act as confirming witnesses. The taking of the witnesses is not meant to be a way of proving to a man that he has committed an offence. It is meant to assist the process of reconciliation by emphasizing and explaining calmly the gravity of the situation. Nowadays, we call that an "intervention" and the group may also include a qualified third party - counselor, teacher, priest or physician. The Rabbis had a wise saying, "*Judge not alone, for none may judge alone except God.*"

3) Adjudication: If the negotiation step does not resolve the situation either, the third step is to have the whole Church or community of believers confront the wrongdoer. The case is brought to the Christian fellowship because troubles are never amicably settled by going to a civil court of law. Further, the Church provides an atmosphere of Christian prayer, Christian love and Christian fellowship in which personal relationships may be righted in the light of love and of the Gospel. Finally, in matters of honor and shame, the community is the final arbiter, for the community as a whole suffers from the wrong.

4) Excommunication: If the offender chooses to disregard the believing community's judgment, the consequence is "excommunication." This means that if none of the three steps has brought a resolution of the situation, then the wrongdoer should be treated like "*a Gentile or a tax collector.*" That is, the wrongdoer should be put out of the Church with the hope that temporary alienation alone may bring the erring person to repentance and change. The sinner is expelled because every obvious case of unrepented sin denies the Gospel's power and the Church's mission of reconciling sinners to God and to the community. But the excommunication should be carried out with genuine grief (1 Cor 5:2), not vindictive glee over another's "fall" or self-righteous pride.

Many Scripture scholars think that Jesus would not have suggested this step, and that it is a personal addition by Mathew. They wonder how this type of expulsion can be squared with Jesus' openness to sinners, including corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes, or with the story of the Prodigal Son. But let us remember that Jesus' reception of these people depended on their change of heart and the abandonment of

their sinful ways, for only these responses enabled them to be reconciled with God and the community. Jesus concludes the action plan by stating that all his disciples have authority to “*bind or loose*,” that is, to settle conflicts and legal cases between community members. In addition, Jesus gives the assurance that when the Church community gathers in Jesus' name, in the spirit of prayer, to hear a legal case, Jesus is there to guide and ratify the procedure.

Life messages: 1) **We are our brother's/sister's keeper.** Modern believers tend to think that they have no right to intervene in the private lives of their fellow believers; so they pay no heed to the serious obligation of encouraging an erring brother or sister to give up his or her sinful ways. Others evade the issue saying, “As a sinner, I don't have the moral courage or the right to correct someone else.” But Jesus emphatically affirms that we are our brothers' keepers, and we have the serious obligation to correct one who has injured us in order to help our neighbors retain their Christian Faith and practice, especially through our model Christian lives. Have we offered advice and encouragement to our friends and neighbors and co-workers when it was needed, and loving correction in private where that was possible? Let us admit the fact that a great part of the indifference to religion shown by our young men and women is due to lack of parental control, training and example. If the children of Christian families grow up as practical pagans, it is mainly because the Christian Faith has meant little or nothing to their parents. It is a well-known fact that when parents are loyal to their Faith in their daily lives, their children will, as a rule, be loyal to it.

2) Gather in Jesus' name and work miracles: Today's Gospel reminds us of the good we can do together, and of how we can do it. Jesus says, “*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*” If any group of us will gather, work, and act with the Holy Spirit guiding us, we become much more than simply the sum of our numbers. Two becomes more than two, and three becomes more than three. The sum of our individual ideas, resources and abilities becomes much more because of the synergy that God's presence provides. In our Faith community, we act together so that we may help one another in God's Name, thereby multiplying our resources and ability to do what God calls us to do. Today, Jesus makes it clear how important we are, one to another. Through our links to one another in Christ, there is a capacity in our community, which enables us to use God's power to make healing and life-giving love more effective among His people. We come together, we stay together, we work together – in our Lord's name, bringing to focus the presence of God and unleashing the power of the Spirit – to transform our lives and the lives of all God's children. We do gather in Jesus' name and invoke his presence, and that opens our hearts to allow him to be a part of us and of what we do. That is what we experience at each Eucharist – we in him and he in us.

JOKE OF THE WEEK:

1: A pastor preached a wonderful sermon, saying we should love our enemies. And, when he got through he asked, "Is there anybody in the audience who can truthfully say that he or she has no enemies?" An old gentleman got up right underneath the pulpit, and he said, "Father, I ain't got no enemies." So the Pastor tells the congregation, "Let's listen. This man has the secret. He can teach us something. Go ahead, sir, now tell us how we do that." "Oh," he said, "it ain't hard. You see, I've outlived all those rascals."

2) Grandma's list: There was the grandmother celebrating her golden wedding anniversary who told the secret of her long and happy marriage. "On my wedding day, I decided to make a list of ten of my husband's faults which, for the sake of the marriage, I would overlook." A guest asked the woman what some of the faults she had chosen to overlook were. The grandmother replied, "To tell you the truth, I never did get around to making that list. But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I would say to myself, "Lucky for him that's one of the ten."

3) Or would you be more like the woman who was bitten by a rabid dog, and it looked as if she was going to die from rabies. The doctor told her to put her final affairs in order. So the woman took pen and paper, and began writing furiously. In fact, she wrote and wrote and wrote. Finally, the doctor said, "That sure is a long will you're making." She snorted, "Will, nothing! I'm making a list of all the people I'm going to bite!"

4: One New Year's Eve at London's Garrick Club, British dramatist Frederick Lonsdale was asked by Seymour Hicks to reconcile with a fellow member. The two had quarreled in the past and never restored their friendship. "You must," Hicks said to Lonsdale. "It is very unkind to be unfriendly at such a time. Go over now and wish him a happy New Year." So Lonsdale crossed the room and spoke to his enemy. "I wish you a happy New Year," he said, "but only one."