

HOMILY SUNDAY 23 – A (Homily 02)
“Forgiveness and Love – the Heart of the Church”
(Ezekiel 33:7-9; Psalm 95; Romans 13:8-10; Mt 18:15-20)

Can you sum up the Bible in one sentence?

St. Paul, in the second reading, does it for us. The commandments, he tells us, are summed up in this one word: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

That bold statement goes even further than what Jesus taught us – to love God first of all, and then to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. On these two commandments, Jesus said, hang the whole law and the prophets.

St. Paul feels free to strip that teaching down to one sentence, and omit the part about loving God, because of Jesus’ other teachings, that what we do to the least of our brothers and sisters, we are doing to him. So for St. Paul, to love our neighbor as we love our selves, is to love God in that neighbor.

Therefore, the whole law is summed up in this one sentence: “Love our neighbor as we love ourselves.”

That challenge is noted by the prophet Ezekiel, in the first reading. He outlines one aspect of what it means to love others, and that is fraternal correction. We are to go to our brothers and sisters who are doing wrong, and point out their wrong doing to them with loving concern.

Jesus says very much the same thing in the gospel, when he advises us to go to those who are hurting us, and point out their fault. In today’s language, we would call this tough love.

There was an Oblate brother in a northern community years ago who had a problem with alcohol that was affecting his work as maintenance man at the hospital. The hospital administrator and the pastor of the parish decided to do what is called in addictions awareness circles, “concerned intervention.” They met with him, told him that getting drunk was wrong and not appropriate for anyone, let alone a professed religious and a hospital employee. They told him that if this ever happened again, he would have to either resign his position or go for treatment. It did happen again. They met with him and told him he had a choice, to either go for treatment or resign. He begged for another chance. They held firm, and told him they were

calling one of two numbers – the retirement home or the treatment center. Which number did he want them to call? He caved in and chose treatment.

This particular brother enjoyed three years of happy, free sobriety after that treatment before he died, thanks to the tough love, the fraternal correction of the hospital administrator and the pastor. They had put today's reading into practice, and loved their neighbor by correcting him out of loving concern.

In the gospel, Jesus takes us further into the nature of loving others. He teaches us that if anyone hurts us, we are not to fight back, nor run away, but to go to that person and simply share our feelings about what they are doing.

This is called communicating with love. This is essentially the best way to try to forgive anyone who is hurting us – to point out what they are doing wrong and to share how we feel about that behavior, and to let it go – no revenge, name calling or getting even. How the other person responds is up to them and not our responsibility at all. There is the possibility of reconciliation, if the other person apologizes, but that is secondary. As long as we have been honest, and communicated with love, then we are free to let go of the anger and hurt, to give it to God, to forgive and to move on with our lives in peace and joy.

This teaching, to be able to forgive those who are hurting us in any way, is at the heart of the gospel, and the life of the Church. We take in negative energy, and instead of responding in kind, we hold it, ponder it, pray about it, and then choose to give it back to those who originally hurt us, with love, thus breaking the cycle of violence that plaques our world, and setting ourselves free from anger and resentment.

In the same gospel, Jesus teaches us another aspect of forgiveness that is very important, and that is that we must never stop trying to forgive. That is the meaning of the enigmatic statement that if the offender does not listen to us, others and even the Church, then we are to treat him or her as a gentile or tax collector.

That has been interpreted as setting strong boundaries, putting into place a peace bond, cutting off all ties, or shunning that person. That would be the easiest way, but would side step the stunning nature of the Gospel of forgiveness. What is the real meaning of this teaching, then?

In the gospel of Matthew, who is the tax collector? It is Matthew himself. He is telling us to treat our enemies as Jesus treated him, calling him when he was a sinner. And in the gospel of Matthew, who are the gentiles? At the end of the gospel, we are told to go to the whole world, to the gentiles, and teach them precisely this commandment, to love others as they love themselves, to forgive those who are hurting them. The radical meaning is clear – we are to never stop trying to forgive those who are hurting us.

Jesus ends today's gospel passage with a dramatic statement that where two or three are gathered together in his name, he is there with us. That is a clear definition of the Church, the Body of Christ – believers who gather together in his name.

The rest of the readings then teach us what the Church, those gathered in his name do – they love one another by daring to correct each other fraternally, and to forgive others the harm that they are doing. That is the radical nature of the Church, the followers of Jesus. So the message is clear – love and forgiveness is at the heart of the Church. To love and to forgive is what it means to be Church, to be a follower of Jesus.

The Eucharist that we now share in together is itself an experience of Jesus forgiving us, accepting us as we are, and transforming us by Word and Sacrament, into his people, the Church, the Body of Christ, missioned to go out to the world and teach all nations this great new way of life.

So let us remember, as we celebrate today, that love, expressed both as fraternal correction and as forgiveness that never stops trying, is at the heart of the life of the Church.