

A Bible Bullet (aimed at the heart)

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A
Ezekiel 33:7-9; Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20

REFLECTION:

Genesis 4:9

And the Lord asked Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” Cain answered, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?”

The story is a famous one. You know what happened to Abel. The question for this coming week is: Now that we have the gift of the New Testament, how would we answer Cain’s question? Then, how does this speak to us about the readings for next Sunday?

When hearing this week’s gospel reading from Matthew, reflect on a commentary offered by William Barclay, a noted scripture scholar. Barclay suggests that this passage in Matthew is certainly not a report of what Jesus said word for word, but it does go back to lessons Jesus taught. The message seems to say, “If anyone sins against you, spare no effort to make that person admit the fault, and to get things right again between you.” The passage then offers a step-by-step approach to healing the breach.

Matthew states that if your efforts do not succeed, treat the person as a Gentile or tax collector. This does not mean that we are to isolate them and consider them among the lost. Jesus never found them hopeless. In fact, he befriended tax collectors, as with Matthew, the apostle, and his short friend, Zacchaeus. So these words are not in fact an injunction to abandon anyone, but to win all over with love. **Matthew goes on to remind us that the relationships we experience on earth will have an eternal quality. We must do our best to get them right here.**

In an article written for Commentary, David Blumenthal, Professor of Judaic Studies at Emory University, wrote:

I also feel God’s presence in moments of human contact--with students, with friends, frequently with family members, and sometimes even with strangers. Much of human contact is routine, some of it abrasive. But I have become accustomed to stopping myself and looking at the other--in wonder-- for each of us one day will return to God.

The real challenge seems to be to look at others in wonder as Blumenthal suggests. One day each of us will return to God. If we drag unforgiveness behind us as we stand before the throne, how can we expect the God who emptied himself, became man, and died to save us, forgive us our sins?

Consider, too, the words of Ron Rolheiser in The Holy Longing:

We have our sins forgiven by being in community with each other, at table with each other. Bluntly put, we will never go to hell as long as we are touching the community--touching it with sincerity and a modicum of contrition.

Rolheiser's words are powerful. But the power our forgiveness in community has comes not from his words. The power comes from the Incarnation, the power of Christ within us. Christ calls us to reconciliation with our Father in heaven and with each other today -- right here, right now.

The message of the gospel is compelling. More convicting in style and message is the reading from Ezekiel:

If you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but I will hold you responsible for their death. If you warn the wicked and they choose not to turn from their ways, they will surely die, but you will be saved.

That's powerful! We are required to speak out against sin and to be active participants in transforming the world into the Kingdom of God. Redemption of the human race is the mission of the Church. We are the Church.