**Homily for the Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

**September 6, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Ezekiel 33:7-9 (You shall warn the wicked man to change his ways.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 95 (If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.)*

*Second Reading: Romans 13:8-10 (Love is the fulfillment of the law.)*

*Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20 (How to confront a brother/sister who sins against you.)*

I really hate confrontation. I get very nervous whenever I have to challenge people, whether in person, or in a homily, or in any other setting. And, most people I know don’t like confrontation any better than I do. Yet, as we heard in the reading from the Prophet Ezekiel, remaining silent and avoiding conflict at all costs is *not* the answer. Sometimes we may even be *obliged* to confront sinful behavior. Though Ezekiel doesn’t explicitly spell out what those circumstances are, we can deduce them pretty easily from the passage. First, there seems to be an assumption that the sinner’s behavior is quite serious, such that he will die if he doesn’t repent. That’s why it’s so urgent that somebody warn him *now*, before it’s too late. Second, there appears to be an additional assumption that the sinner does not recognize how serious his sin is. Hence, unless someone offers a word of reproof, he may never understand the harm that he’s doing.

Those are two important criteria for us to consider when we discern whether or not to confront someone’s behavior. If a person has sinned, but has already shown remorse for that mistake, then there’s no need to rub it in with further criticism. It’s better to just let it go and allow the person to repent on his own terms. It also doesn’t pay to criticize people over minor indiscretions, which cause no real harm to anyone. That’s just *nagging*, and it causes people to tune us out even when we complain about more significant matters. So, the time to confront is when we deem a person’s behavior to be *sufficiently hurtful* to himself or others that it really needs to change, *and* when it appears that the person *doesn’t realize* how serious the problem has become.

Our *motive* for confronting also matters a great deal. In the prophecy, the motive is clearly altruistic – to save the sinner from death. Even when the stakes are not nearly that high, our principal reason for confronting someone should always be the benefit of the *other person*, not to address our own grievances. Our aim should be to *help* the other person to see the damage that he’s doing and to understand how his behavior is hurting people, so that he can stop. Too often, we confront people because we’re annoyed by them. We want them to change because that would benefit *us*. If that’s our main reason to speak up, then we would do better to remain silent. When we confront another for our *own* sake, we’re not going to do it with love and compassion, but with anger, resentment and self-righteousness. And, that will be painfully obvious to the person at the receiving end of our criticism. On the other hand, if we’re motivated by love and genuine concern for the other person’s welfare, then our *good* intentions often will be perceived and appreciated by the other party.

In today’s gospel, Jesus offers us some really good advice, with specific steps for how to confront a brother or sister who has sinned against us. First, approach the person in private. That may seem scary, but it’s actually the safest option. People get defensive when they’re embarrassed. For these types of encounters to work, both parties must be able to hear each other’s concerns and perspectives. So, we can greatly improve our odds of success just by ensuring privacy, and by speaking with courtesy and charity.

If the person will not listen to our *private* critique, even when it’s offered with love and respect, then the next step is to call for back-up. Jesus says to bring in one or two other people, “so that every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.” That’s a concept borrowed from Jewish law. *Only* testimony supported by two or three witnesses was considered valid in a court of law. To our *modern* ears, this probably sounds more like an *intervention*, like when several friends and family members gather to try to convince an addict to seek treatment. But, there’s also a sound psychological principle behind Jesus’ advice. People tend to accept criticism more readily when it comes from a person whom they consider *objective*. That’s why feuding couples can often benefit from a marriage counselor. Even if they struggle to hear criticism from *each other*, they can sometimes accept it when they hear an objective third party say, “Hmm, you make a good point.”

If the sinner still refuses to listen to a few concerned friends, then the next step, according to Jesus, is to “tell the church.” In other words, bring the matter to the *community*, to clarify what they consider acceptable or unacceptable behavior. If it’s not just a personal matter, but a situation in which community norms are being violated, then the community may have a disciplinary role to play. The person may even face some type of censure from a higher authority. In a business setting, for example, this could mean taking a complaint to the Human Resources Department, after you and a few co-workers have failed to resolve it on your own. When people won’t listen to their peers, sometimes the only option is to go up the chain of command, so to speak.

Finally, if *all* efforts fail, then the last resort, according to Jesus, is to “treat the person as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.” In other words, when a person shuns community standards, then the community may need to shun *him*. That sounds harsh, but remember how Jesus reached out to Gentiles and tax collectors and others who were considered outcasts. Like him, we should never give up hope for repentance and reconciliation.

In fact, that’s the point of the final sentence in today’s gospel, which many of us know by heart, but only taken out of its original context. Jesus is saying, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name *to pray for one of their brothers or sisters who has become lost and estranged from the community*, there I am in the midst of them.” Jesus does not want a single one of his straying sheep to be lost, nor does he want us to write them off and forget about them. So, whenever *we* show that same concern by praying together for one of our own who has become lost, Jesus gladly supports us. He never wants us to give up on anyone, even people who have sinned against us and have rebuffed all of our efforts at reconciliation. His fervent desire is that the Christian community be united and at peace. To achieve that goal, we must always be *honest* about our disagreements, *charitable* and *proactive* in our efforts to resolve conflicts, *concerned* about those who have gone astray, and *merciful* toward those who ask for forgiveness.