

Rev. Toan Do
Ezechiel 33:7-9
Romans 13:8-10
Matthew 18:15-20

23RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Epiphany Catholic Church
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Let me briefly bring you back to two weekends ago, and then last weekend. Two weekends ago, because of the will of God that Peter, representing his other disciples, mates and soul, and proclaimed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God. And because of that proclamation, Jesus praised Peter and gave him the nickname to be the rock, metaphorically, the rock on upon which the church of Jesus and the church of God was built. Last weekend, because in another way, Peter failed, as I mentioned in this mass last weekend, failed to transform that rock, that concrete material into a living faith and belief in God and Jesus. That rock became the stumbling one, and Satan in the eyes and in the journey of Jesus toward God. So, in the last two weeks, the gospel from Matthew gives us an idea into what the church and the foundation of church should last after his time here on earth. It is an ideal church in which, as long as the members of a Christian community proclaim Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God, and transform that proclamation into a living faith, that Church of God will last until the end of time.

This week and the following weekend, we listen and learn another block of passages in the Gospel of Matthew. Particularly this weekend, we hear about, in a sense, some instructions about fraternal corrections as you can imagine. Just think of us here as a community of hundreds, of 150 people, here. We all came here of one mind and one heart, unified and united in the faith of God and of the resurrection of Jesus. In reality, we know that it is not possible. And in fact, Jesus not only seemed to have known that, but he seemed to have envisioned the church of community members full and replete of conflicts and disagreements. How do we go about resolving our differences while still living and transforming our faith upon which the church of Jesus and the community of God's believers live and build on?

That is the part that now we're leaving behind: the ideal church upon which rock and foundation, proclaiming Jesus to be the Christ and the Son of God. We move on into the next part, fraternal corrections among ourselves. How do we go about

solving some of the disagreements, even a tiny one? Jesus seemed to give at least three steps here. The first step is when one of us, when our brother or our sister, sins against us, go to that person and relate to that person his or her fault between the two of them. Namely, the first step, which is very delicate, Jesus seemed to tell us not to expose the one who sins against us for public shame, but to work it out in ways, in a delicate way, that in the end, the purpose of that resolution is not only conversion, but also reconciliation. Because if your brother or your sister listens to you, you have won over your sibling. Right from the beginning of this gospel message, Jesus advises them the purpose to live as a community of believers and children of God full of conflict, replete of disagreements at the end of the day, the purpose of that community to survive is conversion and reconciliation. Of course, Jesus also seemed to have known and envisioned that has not always worked. How often we fail despite the fact we try to reconcile ourselves with one another?

The next step seems a little bit more difficult. Namely, if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you so that every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses. This level increases the challenges, increases the difficulties to come to terms with one another.

Even more so, more challenging is the third step. If he or she refuses to listen to the witnesses, tell the church. Just imagine that one of us here comes up in front of the whole congregation and exposes our brother or sister publicly and in shame. I bet you, 99% of the time we will never see that brother or sister again ever. But that is exactly as difficult as it is. It may sound difficult to us in the 21st century, but it was what Jesus asked his disciples to do, just that. I think historical and cultural milieu may help us. In the time, in the late first century, for example, Christians were living in underground churches. Just think of today. A Christian church in China when they have to survive, to learn to survive from oppression from the government. They cannot have assembly publicly. So fraternal correction, I would imagine, would be a bit easier than in a country like us in which we are given the opportunities and the rights we claim to freedom, autonomy, and so on.

For us, for public and communal correction is really not what Jesus was trying to tell us. We would not be able to endure such things. But even then, Jesus had seen that, I believe, or had envisioned, the worst-case scenario or even more so. If he refuses to listen to the witnesses tell the church; if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him or her as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. Here we sometimes try to understand what Jesus really meant by this, but putting us back 2,000 years ago, Jesus included, himself included, was subject to let's say the Romans and the Greco-Roman culture and law. And for them, just like us in our

society today and much less elsewhere around the world, we know that we can go to court and sue anyone for anything.

Jesus seemed to have seen that in his own time because of the Roman law, they valued the right to the citizen. And as Paul tells in the letter to the Romans in chapter six, he accuses some of the Christians who would go to court and sue one another. Jesus seemed to have seen that, but that would be the last resort. My challenge to this verse here is that, I hope, along with some other commentators, I hope that the last resort in which Jesus asked his disciples to treat another brother or sister as they would treat a Gentile or a tax collector, I hope that is only temporary, not permanent, because at the end of chapter 18 verse 15B, the hope and the purpose of conflict resolution is conversion and reconciliation.

From within a community, we see this. Paul, in his letter today to the Romans, seems to go one step further. Paul acclaims and tells the Christians in Rome, "Owe nothing to anyone except to love another." So another, one another, seems to go beyond the Christian community, beyond the circle of a community to go out and love those who, we may say, disagree with us strongly, politically, even hating us. We must learn, Paul seems to say, to extend our Christian value through our action beyond the Christian circle.

As many of us, I suppose, in the last week or two, a week and a half to two weeks, have heard, have read and followed the criminal case in Plymouth County in Massachusetts of a mother who happened to murder her three infant children. And as of Friday, the jury came to a hung trial. I followed the trial from early on. My first reaction was, she was guilty. How could anyone, how could a mother even murder her own three little children? My instinct and spontaneous reaction was she was guilty of murdering, of a criminal case here. As I struggled over this, by Tuesday, the jury came to the first deadlock. And then I began to discuss and talk with friends, not only locally here, but also some in Wisconsin, and also in Minneapolis, Minnesota. And one of them, as of yesterday, 3:00 AM in the morning, sent me a text Saturday morning. The person said and reminded me, no mother or father in their right mind would have committed such a heinous crime. It is at that moment when I saw, that I was reminded, I was thinking of myself as, in a way, a moral righteous person at the beginning. And who am I, in a sense, to go out to bluntly accuse and not knowing every detail, to come to such a conclusion, although we know, and I do believe still, there is evil. In fact, I would condemn pure evil in this act of murdering of the three infants. But I have no right because I know no facts to accuse and condemn this person. There's so much more for myself and others to learn. And we know this trial has drawn attention, not only locally, nationwide, and to some extent I heard from international communities

around the world. And this case will give us so much opportunity and many more to discuss and to learn later. As we come, my first reaction, as I'm sure many from both sides, is to come to the conclusion that this act was criminally committed by a person.

As the gospel today tells us, the purpose of coming together as a Christian and members of a worshiping community is to convert ourselves and to reconcile ourselves first of all within our own heart, to gain and regain the peace that God wants and wishes each of us to have. It is as difficult as it is in many, many cases. Jesus charges his disciples and us today to go the extra mile to learn to reconcile, because he wants us also, every, every time when two or three disagree with one another or agree with one another, the ratification also is present in the heavenly kingdom.

Our actions here, regardless if individually or as a community, have ratification in the court and the house of God. The scriptures, particularly the gospel today, after we learn that the church can be built on the proclamation of Jesus being the Christ, the son of God, as strong as it is, it is still full of members who are sinners. They are the ones. Jesus charged the disciples then and charges us today to come to terms to learn, to reconcile and convert ourselves to God.