

10 September 2017

23rd Sunday in OT – Year A

Fraternal Connection

A few weeks ago, I was driving through a side street in my neighborhood. Half a block up, I saw a young girl weaving in and out of the street on a scooter, and so I slowed the car down. She disappeared from sight, but I remained driving at a crawl. As I got closer, she rode her scooter right out in front of my car and I slammed on the breaks. Suddenly, from the other side of the road, an adult looked up from his glowing iPhone screen and said somewhat distractedly, “careful, honey, you gotta watch out.”

I drove away a little shaken, but grateful: grateful that I was paying attention, and that this little girl was safe. But I was also a little upset. I wanted to say to the dad, “hey pal, you’re the one letting your daughter play in traffic. YOU watch out!”

We hear in our first reading God speaking to Ezekiel, charging him to be a watchman for the house of Israel.

You, son of man, I have appointed watchman for the house of Israel; when you hear me say anything, you shall warn them for me.

The goal of a watchman is to survey the landscape. To watch the hills for approaching enemies. For the Israelites, this message comes as too little, too late. The city of Jerusalem had already been besieged when Ezekiel was writing, and the Israelites had already been driven into exile in Babylon.

Like a father warning his daughter to watch out for cars after the fact, we might ask, why bother warning people after the fact?

So what are we to make of this reading? Is God's message too little, too late? We see all around us things that betoken end-of-times concern. Hurricanes Irma and Jose are on course to strike our nation, and there is little people can do but batten down the hatches, evacuate, and pray for minimal damage and loss of life. People are only starting to recover from hurricane Harvey. Elsewhere we have raging forest fires and earthquakes.

And then there are challenges *within* our control. Political divisions tear at the corners of our collective American spirit. We have discussions within our church that become unseemly public spats, where people on twitter start slinging mud and calling each other names. I've read a few tweets and Facebook messages where Catholics call fellow Catholics heretics, without a hint of irony or self-reflection.

Our Gospel reading today clearly emphasizes the importance of fraternal correction, calling one another to repent when there are grievances between each other. If you're like me, you don't much enjoy people telling you what's wrong with you. In our preaching class with Fr. Bob VerEecke, we used to joke that the best way to start a homily is to look out over a crowd, squint thoughtfully, and ask, "*do you know what's wrong with you people?*"

But how are we to watch over one another – to care for one another – in a way that doesn't descend into backbiting, monitoring, or petty skirmishes?

Jerusalem was, and is, a city set on a hill, and a good watchman knew the lay of the land around him. In an age marked by divisions and mutual

mistrust, we might consider the lay of the land around each one of us. *Who are the people I surround myself with? Who are my friends, colleagues, brothers-in-law, teammates, roommates, and supervisors that I regularly interact with? Who can I have an honest conversation with? Who do I trust enough to have an honest disagreement of ideas with: about politics, about my thoughts on God, about how to be a good parent or spouse?*

These are important questions, because this Gospel presumes something. Before we go about correcting one another and calling out each other's mistakes, our Gospel – and our faith -- presume a community built on trust and mutual love. A community that actively desires unity, and as such, is willing to work through the inevitable challenges of disagreement and discord. Fraternal *correction* can only happen when there is first fraternal *connection*.

Our own BC ethicist, Fr. Jim Keenan, calls sin “the failure to bother to love.” Do I ***bother to love*** someone enough, to challenge them when needed? At face value, this Gospel answers the question, “how do I confront someone who has done me wrong?” But **it requires no love** or to confront another person, either privately or publicly. But we Christians come together as a church – as the assembled people of God – and we hitch our cart to one another. Like the Israelites protected by their watchmen, we sink or swim together. Our salvation is worked out amidst this group of people, right here. Scary thought, isn't it? Sin, for a community of faith, begins when we pull away from one another, and we fail to bother to love.

And so our Gospel challenges each of us to consider on a deeper level, “Who, in my life, do I entrust my well being to? Who bothers enough to

love me, and how do they reveal that love to me? Who are those friends and loved ones I can call when I'm in real need? Who in your life can tell you hard truths, when you need to hear them?

One of my best friends in the Jesuits, Tim, can ask just the right questions to cut through my Midwestern fluff and niceness. Tim can tell me exactly what he thinks, and he expects the same from me. And when he challenges me on something, I trust that it has come from a place of prayer and love. I sometimes bristle at his response at first. But after a time, that initial feeling of stung pride – “how *dare* you??” subsides. And then I can recognize the genuine love – grounded in honesty and an unvarnished desire for my own good – showing through. Tim bothers to love, even when it means he risks being misunderstood, or rejected.

And friends, this sort of love is precisely what Christians owe one another. As Paul reminds us,

*Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another...
Whatever other commandments there may be,
are summed up in this saying:
"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
Love does no evil to the neighbor;
hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.*

So how do we show this love? How do we lovingly call our friends to greater honesty? Let me offer three practical rules for confronting another, or as we say it in the Jesuits, “care-fronting”:

1. First, do no harm. In the words of 90's Europop sensation Haddaway, “*What is love? Baby don't hurt me, Don't hurt me, no more.*” Our challenging conversations with friends and loved ones should follow the

Hippocratic oath: **Do no harm.** When you need to challenge someone, ask yourself, “am I saying this tough truth in a way that they can hear it? Or has a little emotional manipulation crept in and overtaken the message?”

To check this, consider rule number two:

2. Remove yourself from the equation. Thomas Aquinas says that love is desiring the good of another. And desiring the good of another requires that we recognize our own entangled egos and interests in confronting another. So ask, “am I challenging them because they threaten my own security and sense of self...or because they are genuinely in the wrong?” In other words, “is this about them, or ultimately just about me?” Perhaps a friend needs to be confronted, but I’m not the person to do it.

3. Third and finally, pray for the courage to restore unity. No one likes to confront another they love. Confrontation risks rejection, misunderstanding, or the charge of being a hypocrite. “How dare you challenge **me**, when you don’t have your own house in order!” But if we can remember that the goal here is greater life for the other, then we owe it to them to speak truth in love. If love waters its roots, our courage will grow. In love, we can rekindle unity.

Jesus reminds us that the result of this fraternal correction is greater connection: “*where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*”

As we approach the altar today, to share a meal as a community of faith, let us call to mind in gratitude those who have bothered to love us in the past. And let us ask for the grace to watch over our brothers and sisters in love,

lest, like the inattentive watchman – or a parent lost in their iPhone -- we love one another, too little, too late.

Rev. Joseph Simmons, SJ

Delivered at 10am Mass St. Ignatius Parish, Chestnut Hill, MA