

## 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – A

There's a somewhat ominous story called the Clown and the Burning Village. The story goes like this: a traveling circus comes to town and pitches their tents in the fields outside town. But there is an accident and the circus catches fire. All the circus workers run around trying to put out the fire. To no avail – the fire starts to grow and is in danger of spreading across the fields to the nearby town. The manager of the circus calls one of the clowns – already in his costume and makeup – and sends him to the town to ask for help to put out the fire, and to warn them that their village is danger. When the clown gets to the village square, he starts shouting and waving his arms and gesticulating – but everyone thinks this is just a part of his act, a way to advertise the circus. And they just laugh at him. The more he waves his arms and yells and jumps up and down, the more they laugh. Until it's too late, and the fire overtakes the town.

This story is cited by Pope Benedict XVI in a book he wrote long before becoming pope; he used this story as an analogy of the challenge faced by Christian theologians in the present age, trying to get people to listen, and being met with ridicule. The Gospel message – or any discussion of religion in general – sounds increasingly absurd to our society. And more and more, some Christian teachings are met not just with ridicule but even hostility.

It's like the watchman from our first reading from the book of Ezekiel. In the ancient world, watchmen had an important duty for the whole community – they would stand watch on the city walls, looking for any sign of danger from an invading army. If they spotted danger, they would sound the alarm. But what if the watchman sounded the alarm, and rather than listening to him, everyone got angry with him, and said that he was talking

nonsense and was just trying to make people upset for no reason. Why doesn't he just leave us alone, and let us carry on with our lives, and let us do what we want to do?

The Gospel message that Jesus Christ gave to the world is of course a message of hope, a message of love, and of peace. But there is also a real sense of urgency to it. At times, Jesus speaks in very strong terms; he issues warnings, because what he is talking about is of vital importance to everyone, and we ignore his message at our own peril.

So as a priest of the Church that Jesus established, it is my duty to preach the fullness of the Gospel message. Sometimes that means giving comfort; other times it means having to admonish. Sometimes it means consoling; other times it means challenging. It has to be both. If a priest did nothing but give comfort and consolation, he wouldn't be completely fulfilling his duty before

God and his flock. If a priest did nothing but admonish and challenge, same thing. He must do both.

Don't worry; I am not about to launch into an angry tirade. No, rather I am going to talk about the role of a prophet. We often think of a prophet as someone who foretells the future. But a more correct understanding of what a prophet does is to preach the truth. That is what all of the prophets of the Old Testament were sent by God to do: to preach the truth to the Jewish people. And sometimes the truth is painful, and the message was a not a pleasant one; the Jews often did not want to hear it, and they rejected the prophets. Of course, whenever they did so, calamity ensued, just like in the story of the village.

In our Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples what to do when a member of the community is out of line – when he or she is straying from the right path, living in a way that does not befit a

Christian. In seminary this was called “fraternal correction” – correcting a brother. It was probably the hardest thing to do in the seminary. Why? Because nobody likes to be corrected. What is our immediate reaction when we are corrected by someone? How do we feel if someone tells us that we’re not doing the right thing, that we’re on the wrong path? My guess is that we don’t usually respond by saying, “You know, you make a very good point. Perhaps I ought to change my ways.” No, I think more often we get defensive. Perhaps we turn it around on the person. “You think I’m a slob! What about that time ten years ago when you left the milk out!” Or perhaps we reject the idea that anyone has any kind of authority over us, and we trot the well-worn phrase, “Don’t judge me!” Or perhaps we just don’t want to deal with it, and we ignore them.

These are pretty common ways of reacting, and that’s because we are fallen creatures, and when we are admonished or corrected

by someone, our pride is hurt. But disputes and disagreements are bound to arise in any community, no matter if it's in the workplace, in government, within a family, even within the Church. And of course, Jesus knows that, and that's why he gave his disciples these instructions in today's Gospel, about what to do when a member of the community is straying from the fold.

So, to reiterate what Jesus said, if someone has sinned against you, take it up with him first. Oftentimes though we take it up with everyone else first. That's not the right way to handle it though – we need to go that person first. If that doesn't work, get two and three witnesses to go with you and address it with him again. If that doesn't work, bring it to the church, to the community. And if that doesn't work, treat him like you would a Gentile or tax collector. What does that mean? Well Jesus himself would eat with Gentiles and tax collectors. So if it is a question of

Church teaching, that individual is in need of re-evangelization and catechesis.

Now, I'm not talking about disputes that come down to differences in opinion. What I am referring to, and what Christ is referring to in this Gospel, is when someone is clearly in a state of sin. So Jesus presents this judicial framework for handling the situation. And the whole point of it is not to punish the person, or to make him feel bad; rather, it's to help him see his need for repentance and conversion, and to bring about reconciliation between him and the community of faith, to bring him back into the fold.

And what is necessary for any kind of fraternal correction is that it be based on objective truth – not a personal opinion, not the way we personally think something should be – but on the truth itself, revealed by God, taught by Christ, given to the Church. The

role of the pope and all the bishops, and all priests, is to teach and uphold the truth. Not to bend it or change it based on whatever will appeal to the greatest number of people or based on what society can handle. And sometimes, that objective truth is not going to appeal to all people. Some will oppose it, they will legislate against it, they will threaten it. No matter – the truth remains the same, in season and out of season, and the duty of the Church remains the same.

But there is one missing element to all this, and that is what St. Paul talks about in our second reading. Whatever kind of correction has to be given, whatever aspect of the truth has to be communicated, the necessary element always has to be LOVE. St. Paul says that love is something we owe one another. It's not optional. We OWE it to each other. It is like a debt that is never paid off. And every one of God's commandments, every teaching of the Church, can be summed up in that one word LOVE.

Whenever it becomes necessary to correct a brother or sister in the faith, it must be done *out of* love, and it must be done *with* love.

- September 6, 2026 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake