

## **Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

Ezekiel 33:7-9

Psalm 94

Romans 13:8-10

Matt 18:15-20

A priest friend of mine in the U.S. told me a story once about the principal of the all-boys Catholic high school he attended. Fr George had been the principal for more than thirty years, and he was something a living legend, both as a great teacher and as a strict disciplinarian. He was famous for the creative punishments he would sometimes give out to guys who were acting out, some of which you probably wouldn't get away with these days.

One year there were two guys who were a couple of years older than my now priest friend, who kept getting into fights. They were apparently friends—of a sort—who were also kind of rivals and couldn't help but end up antagonising each other. As the year began, Fr George tried different things to calm them down and help them get along, but nothing seemed to work. Finally, towards the end of the year, he had had enough. He announced that that afternoon, classes would be shortened by thirty minutes, and the entire school would finish the day in the gym. When the students got there, they saw a boxing ring set up, with the two troublemakers in the middle. And they were wearing huge, oversized boxing gloves – the kind that would allow them to swing as hard as they liked and not cause any real damage. The sight of them fighting was apparently pretty ridiculous, and by the end of their ten rounds they were laughing along with the rest of the boys.

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So, because we are people of free will and independent minds, it's inevitable that we will at times find ourselves in conflict with one another. How we deal with those conflicts largely depends on their context and on the willingness of each person to sort through them. Most of the time, we won't be able to solve our differences by slugging it out with someone, and nor should we. We are required to find more creative avenues for solving our conflicts.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is clear that he wants us as his followers to see our conflicts with one other as redefined in light of him. Our Christian discipleship guides the way in which we handle—and are willing to handle—conflicts with others. Most of Jesus's teachings about how we are to treat others deals first with recognising our own faults – with seeing “the plank” in our own eye rather than “the splinter” in someone else's eye. Sometimes, the analogy is even more dire – that we should settle with our opponent on the way to court lest we be handed over to the judge and then to the jailer. Jesus is clear that the Christian is called to approach any conflict with an eye to themselves first of all – what have I done that needs forgiveness; where am I at fault; where do I need to be reconciled?

In today's Gospel, however, Jesus speaks of what to do in the other situation – if we really are the injured party. First, we have to remember how much he speaks about the importance of forgiveness. “How many times do I have to forgive?” Peter asks this question to Jesus, just as we might ask it of ourselves about a person who keeps committing offenses against us. “Not seven times,” Jesus answers, “but seventy times seven.” Of course, he doesn't mean that we must forgive 490 times – it's really a euphemism for infinity. We are called to forgive as often as someone sincerely asks. Of course, we can't do it on our own strength, but thanks we don't have to – our Lord has already paid the price for the forgiveness of the whole world.

Sometimes though, when someone else hurts us, they don't ask for forgiveness. This is the situation addressed today by Jesus and I think it's one that we would do well to take to heart. Jesus's instruction, of course, is not to pick up boxing gloves and slug it out with the one who has hurt us. Rather, he says that we should humbly approach the person individually and make them aware of the fact they have hurt us. Notice that Jesus does not say we should approach them to accuse them, or to make them feel bad, or to let them know how angry we are about what they've done. Nor are we to go straight to others to whinge about them behind their back. Rather, we start by seeking them out one-to-one if we can, and in a respectful way let them know that they have hurt us in some way.

Hopefully, that alleviates the situation. As Jesus says, “if he listens to you, you have won back your brother.” We exist as part of a family – in a human family of course, but even more so alongside our fellow Christians in the family of God. And seeing others as fellow members of our families, as brothers and sisters, can help us remember that we should be willing to dialogue with respect and understanding. If speaking in private doesn't work, then we can look at bringing the matter to others, first to a few, then even to the larger community, to help the person who has wronged us see their offense. The aim through all of this is not to shame the person, but to help them realise the sin they have committed, not just against us but against God.

Sadly, even this at times doesn't always work, and Jesus envisions this scenario too. There are times when we must unfortunately treat others, in his words, “like a pagan or a tax collector.” Jesus' Jewish audience of the time would have understood these words as advice to be wary of such people, to avoid interacting with them too much, but also to always be ready to forgive and accept them again if they repent. Forgiveness does not mean that we have to let ourselves be hurt again and again – we can and must be on guard around those who have hurt us, and especially those who have not recognised or acknowledged that they have done so. But for us Christians, we never write anyone off – we never say anyone is beyond forgiveness, either ours or God's.

The way of loving and of forgiving that Jesus invites us to is ultimately the way that God loves and forgives us. While it might feel good to slug it out with someone who has hurt us—either literally or figuratively—it doesn't accomplish much in the end.

The principal at my friends' high school knew that – what those two boys couldn't settle with boxing gloves they got over via laughing at the ridiculousness of their own hard-headedness. We too should be people who are openly seeking harmony—with God, with ourselves, and with each other—always being mindful of just how much we have been forgiven ourselves. Remembering our own faults, being ready to forgive, addressing someone in private who has wronged us – these are the mature ways the Christian disciple handles conflict, and it is to this kind of maturity of faith that our Confirmation candidates are being called, as are all of us. So don't harden your heart against those who have hurt you – but pray for them, talk to them if possible, and love them enough to forgive them. Because Jesus loves *you* in exactly the same way.