

## 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in OT: Yr. A – 2020

[Ez 33:7-9 • Rom 13:8-10 • Mt 18:15-20]

If our doctor refused to tell us that we had cancer because it may upset us, would that make you well? Since ignorance is not bliss when it comes to our physical health, why should we tolerate it in our spiritual health? That's the point of today's readings, that if we truly love someone, we care about their spiritual health, especially when sin is present.

In the first reading, God asked the prophet Ezekiel to be a watchman for Israel. Biblical watchmen were not concerned with guarding property, but guarding people. God asked Ezekiel to guard those who strayed from the faith and call them back. By virtue of our baptisms we are watchmen, for Jesus said in the Gospel, *"If your brother sins ... go and tell him his fault."*

Often we hear that it is not our place to judge, and that's true if we are assigning souls to Heaven or Hell. But correcting a person's sinful behavior is our duty and our Lord modeled it numerous times: (1) Jesus rebuked his disciples for being jealous that another cast out a demon in His name; (2) Jesus corrected Peter for blocking His path to the Cross; and (3) Jesus scolded James and John for being too ambitious about their rewards in Heaven. St. Augustine taught, *"we must correct out of love, not out of a desire to hurt [...] You do worse by keeping silent than he does by sinning."* Sin is like cancer; left unchecked it grows and kills our soul. So why do we sin?

The short answer is we abuse freedom. This happens when we take one of two wrong attitudes towards freedom: exaggeration or minimization. Adam and Eve exaggerated their freedom. When they took the fruit from the tree they no longer wanted to be creatures, but rather the Creator who decided right from wrong. Exaggerated freedom does not receive gifts from God, but rather takes them. On the other hand, if we minimize our freedom then we don't accept responsibility for our actions. We say, *"I was born this way,"* or we blame it on culture. This denial of sin makes it impossible to forgive our sins and we forget why Jesus is our Savior.

Sin is offensive because it breaks God's law and damage relationships. God gives us certain laws, just as a manufacturer of a car tells us what will make it run well and be problem free. Is it unreasonable to believe that our Creator may have some expectation of how we turn out? Sorrow is necessary in the forgiveness of sins. Yet sorrow doesn't come from breaking laws, for no one cries after exceeding the speed limit – unless we are pulled over. Our sorrow comes from damaging relationships. Sin affects our relationship with our self, our neighbor, and our God because it brings loneliness and division. It can only be healed after it is pointed out.

Healing begins with confession. God has been trying to get us to confess our sins since the beginning. When Adam ate the forbidden fruit, God knew, but still asked, *"Have you eaten from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat?"* God asked because He was trying to illicit a confession. When God questioned Cain where his brother was, He obviously knew of the murder, but wanted Cain to admit or confess it. When trying to get someone to go to confession, share your own healing experience first. Again we are quick to share where we found physical healing, how about spiritual healing?

Be prepared to answer this objection: *"Why should I confess my sins to a priest instead of just to myself? After all, I may be holier than the priest."* It is never a question of who is holier, but who has been delegated with the power to affect change. I may claim to be a better citizen or patriot, but I'm not running the country because I don't have the power of an elected office. Jesus did not communicate the power to forgive sins to us, but to his leaders – the Apostles. The present-day Apostles or bishops delegate the power to the priests to hear confessions and forgive sins so there is greater access to healing. We also confess our sins to a priest because they are a representative of the believing community and can welcome us back into the fold. When we commit mortal sin, it is like getting kicked out of the classroom. The student doesn't decide when to return to class, only the teacher or principal can reconcile them.

As watchmen, we bear the cross of accountability not just for our self, but those we love. For St. Thomas Becket said, *"Watch my behavior carefully and warn me of my faults, [because] four eyes can see better than two."*