

Homily for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 5-6, 2020

Readings: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Romans 13: 8-10; Matthew 18: 15-20

Preacher: Sr. Joan Sobala

To wear a mask or not? To shop at a business or not? To go to a restaurant or church or not? To send my children to school or not?

During this scary, wearying pandemic, mixed messages come to us from a variety of sources. Do we develop the attitude that says: "Don't tell me what to do!" or do we cooperate in all the ways possible to damp down and clamp down the spread of the insidious virus?

Somewhere between the private, individual decisions we make and the mandates that come from regional and national governments, there is the place of the community in our lives. No matter who we are, we belong to each other. We help shape others. They help shape us.

Many of us continue to live out our faith tradition in a convinced, searching and serious way. We are not alone in this. The late civil rights icon John Lewis shaped his life as a member of the Beloved Community. His conviction took him to the streets and the battering by those filled with hatred of black and brown people. To his death, belonging to the Beloved Community kept John Robert Lewis faithful.

Today's readings give us three ways of acting in life with moral depth, discipline, forgiveness and reconciliation. There are others, of course, but these three appear in today's liturgy. These are hard concepts, enfolded in communities of discipleship. We have seen these ideas lived out poorly or not at all. Sometimes we have seen them lived out magnificently. They are essential ingredients to our living through this pandemic.

First of all, *watchfulness*.

Ezekiel, we hear today, was appointed watchman over the House of Israel. When all was not well with the community, when an enemy threatened, he was to call out a warning to the people. Ezekiel was not called upon to intervene, to see that

all people acted according to the warning. He was only to announce the impending danger. Some might equate the watchman with a whistleblower. But a whistleblower points the finger of blame. The watchman calls all to pay attention to his message.

Warning family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, the public about the dangers of certain activities and false assumptions, upside down values and policies does not endear us to others.

Still, none of us can escape the difficult task of warning others.

Each of us lives with the disturbing question, “If you knew there was danger, why didn’t you sound the alarm?”

How do we sound the alarm in the community so as to be really heard?

With *sensitivity*.

Care is needed when we approach another with a warning. How do we talk with others about the infections and dysfunctions among us? In today’s Gospel, Jesus asks us—*urges us*—to proceed, not with anger and condemnation but with loving care. We have only to look on our television screens to see examples of ill-chosen words or gestures, unspoken assumptions that drive people away—even those we love. Sensitivity makes a difference, but even that doesn’t always work. People are tempted to separate from one another in times of stress, leaving an empty place in the community.

Jesus goes on in the Gospel with a cryptic comment: “Treat (the one with whom you are at odds) as you would treat a Gentile or tax collector.”

Our first impulse is to hear this statement as the final expulsion of the offender from the community. In fact, that is how this passage has been interpreted in history. Excommunicate the unbending one.

From the Magi on, Jesus spent time and energy with Gentiles as well as with tax collectors. Some left Jesus’ presence fed, healed, still beyond the community, but loved from afar. Others followed him in faith.

Toward Gentiles and tax collectors alike, Jesus showed only mercy. Not pity. Mercy. We can do no less.

Mercy.

Paul tells us in Romans today: Owe no debt to anyone except the debt that binds us to love one another.

What is that debt? What do we really owe to one another by being disciples of the Risen Lord, bound together in the Body of Christ.

Mercy is the third thing we owe others in a debt of love—a mercy that does not condemn but touches gently, like a summer breeze.

So is there a limit to the care we have for our brothers and sisters in this critical time, especially if they don't want to be reconciled to the community?

These three things rule no one out. In whatever way we can, let us embrace one another in Jesus' name and never ever give up hope.