

## Homily

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time A

Saturday, September 06, 2014

### READINGS:

- ❖ Ezechiel 33: 7-9
- ❖ Psalm 95
- ❖ Romans 13:8-10
- ❖ Matthew 18:15-20

Good morning. I read an interesting article in La Presse last week by a young philosophy teacher at a CEGEP and it is directly relevant to today's liturgy. I'm sure you have all noticed how everyone today seems to live in virtual space; you walk down the street and you think someone is talking to you but they're really on their cell phone speaking or texting someone else. Everyone is in love with the images on their smart phone. The philosophy teacher explained this using the ancient Greek mythological story about Narcissus. As you will recall, Narcissus was the son of Cephissus the river god and Liriope. He was very handsome and was warned that he would have a long life as long as he never saw an image of himself. One day he caught a glimpse of himself in a pool of water and became so taken by his beauty that he stayed staring at his image, even forgetting to eat or drink; eventually he died. It struck me how apropos this allusion to Narcissus is today when everyone is constantly staring at an image on their iPhone or Blackberry. We have a whole new vocabulary to describe this phenomenon-we have *selfies*, *sexting* and so on. We create personas called avatars in which we can live an imaginary, virtual life. We read how many Hollywood celebrities are worried because their compromising *selfies* have been hacked. The pernicious effects of this becomes obvious when we look around us. When we are self-absorbed, the fetus I carry is only a mass of tissues I can get rid of if it is inconvenient. When we are self-absorbed, this demented, elderly person is disposable and should be 'put down', euthanized, legally! When we are self-absorbed, we consume whatever we want without concern for the harm our consumption does to planet earth.

Today's readings reveal something totally alien to this culture of self-absorption, of being in love with the images of a virtual world. God reveals the real secret of building community, building the Body of Christ. It is quite simple and Jesus patiently throughout the Scriptures teaches it to us

over and over again: love your neighbor as yourself. As Paul says in our Second Reading, “Brothers and sisters: owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who love another has fulfilled the law.” Love of neighbor is precisely the opposite of self-absorption. Love is the transformation of self-absorption to ‘other-absorption’. Love is to be aware of the person in front of me and to be concerned as much about that person as I am about myself. When we come down to it, Jesus boiled down the library of theology and its commentaries to something quite simple: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. ...Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” (Mtt: 22:37ff) Jesus told us many stories or parables about who our neighbor is: the Good Samaritan. As one commentator on today’s readings puts it:

“Paul, however, makes clear that love has very little to do with emotion. The examples of love to which he refers have to do with behavior rather than feeling. Love fulfils the commandment not to break marriage vows, and not to murder, steal or covet... These commandments concern action, not emotion. Our neighbours well know that we love them by how we treat them not by greeting card aphorisms.”

What is the ‘glue’ which holds a community together, what knits the Body of Christ together? Quite simply it is love in action not just in words. It is living among real flesh and blood individuals not in a virtual world of my choosing and one which I control..

Loving one another sounds great in theory but not so easy in practice as we all know so well. We have all experienced injustices and real harm from our ‘neighbour’ whom we are trying to love as Jesus asked us. How do we do this in our everyday lives? How can we live joyfully when so-and-so irritates me so much? Vatican Council 2 encouraged us to use all the human sciences to deepen our understanding of our faith and newer psychotherapeutic techniques can help us here. CBT or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy has had remarkable success in helping people deal with anxiety and depression and I think it can be used to help us love one another more deeply. The basic idea in CBT is that we need to break the cycle of thought—leading to a particular feeling that leads to certain behaviours. For example, someone has lied to us in the past. The next time we meet that person, there is the thought ‘that person is a liar and can’t be trusted’ This leads to a feeling of anger or bitterness and this leads to a behavior of not speaking to that person. CBT tries to change our actions by changing our thought processes. That one action of the person who lied does not define that person for all eternity. We need to think of some good

quality he or she has and if we do, our feeling changes, and our behavior follows as well. This is an oversimplification but is useful when we feel we can't possibly love THAT person. (After all Jesus even said we have to love our persecutors!)

Our Gospel reading today is challenging and it is important for us to really understand what Jesus is teaching us. We should also put the Gospel into its context in Matthew. Just before this passage we use in today's liturgy, Matthew gives us the parable of the lost sheep. "When he finds it, I tell you, he feels far happier over this one sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not get lost." Immediately following our Gospel is the encounter with Peter when Jesus tells him he must forgive not 7 times but 77 times—an infinite number of times. Today's Gospel is about dealing with behaviours that tear down community rather than build it up. Remember Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: "Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you."(4:29) Jesus gives us a template for correcting others based on love and concern rather than judgment. Reading this Gospel put me in mind of something we are called to do: giving negative feedback in a positive manner. In my role as a teacher of young physicians, giving negative feedback can be difficult. There are elaborate models of how staff physicians should do this and they could almost be based on this Gospel. The main point of these models is that negative feedback should always take into account where the resident MD is in their life:

?sick?overwhelmed?tired?depressed and should always be hopeful and point the way to improve the resident's performance. Always be constructive. Our purpose is to bring about a change in a behavior that would be detrimental to the resident's becoming a good physician. Feedback comes from that concern—isn't this the love Jesus is talking about? This is what Matthew's Gospel is about today. I think it is wrong to focus on expelling someone from the community. One commentator gives a very helpful interpretation of the meaning of "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." In other words, they are to go into the outer darkness, exiled from the community of believers. But wait. Didn't Jesus associate with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes?the outcasts? The marginalized? Didn't he dine with them? We need to recall this when we hear these words from today's Gospel. His fellow Pharisees scorned him for this: "When the Son of Man came, he ate and drank, and everyone said, 'Look at this man! He is a glutton and a drinker, a friend of tax collectors and other outcasts!' God's wisdom, however, is shown to be true in its results."(Mtt11:19). The real interpretation for us this morning is that

Jesus never gives up on anyone, he never stops reaching out to them. In other words, if the person will not change his behavior, continue to seek them out, continue to go after them, never give up on anyone. Like the shepherd who left the 99 to search for the lost one. “Whatever you bind on earth will be...bound in heaven.” is not a condemnation but rather, as one commentator states, “if we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it.?”

I conclude with the words you will find in your missal in the commentary on today’s liturgy:

“Living in our various communities (home, work, church, neighborhood etc.) will never be easy. Let us pray for the grace to discern God’s presence at the heart of those communities, encouraging, and supporting us in our struggles to love our neighbor as our self.”

“O that today you would listen to the voice of the Lord! Do not harden your hearts.”