

Rev. Derek Fairman

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time A

In the Gospel reading, the Lord gives us instructions for dealing with the sins of others. He tells us that we should first admonish the sinner just between the two of us. If the sinner persists, bring two others. If the sinner persists, tell the Church. If the sinner persists, then treat the person as one would a Gentile or tax collector. The Lord tells us to use a certain bit of discretion. The Lord does not tell us to deal with the sin publicly at first, but to admonish the sinner in a way that avoids unnecessary humiliation.

This idea of discretion explains why the Lord teaches us to involve as few people as possible when admonishing the sinner. There are two ways of dealing with the sins of others: we can use their mistakes to feel better about ourselves, or we can help them to come back to the way that the Lord points out to us, for their benefit.

The first way is a selfish way. This way is about making ourselves look better, by pointing out the sins and foolishness and failings of others. This way does not like or want any sense of discretion. This way seeks to make others' problems as public as possible. After all, if the point of others' failings is to make yourself look better or feel better, you need an audience. What better audience could you find than a video broadcast over social media?

Making fun of others for their failings can be made publicly, but even when we make fun of others to only a few people, we are still not doing what the Lord commands: to guide someone discreetly at first. Additionally, we are not confronting someone with sin, we are gossiping about the person. These ways of dealing with others' failings and shortcomings have a downside, and that is, it works until you are the one whose failings end up on full public display. Then, the measure with which you measured is measured out to you.

There is a better way. The better way is to remember what the Lord taught us, "Do to others as you would want to be done to you." If we would not want our problems to be made quite public, then we should not make the problems of others public. If we do not like others gossiping about us, then we must not gossip. Instead, we need to exercise discretion. We need to follow what the Lord told us in the Gospel passage. First, admonish the sinner privately. Second, bring two or three others to admonish the sinner. Third, tell the Church to admonish the sinner. Keep the matter as private as possible, and avoid unnecessary embarrassment.

Admonishing the sinner is one of the spiritual works of mercy, but it should not be done to make ourselves look better. It should be done to prevent the person from failing, from sinning, because the sin will lead down the wrong path, and because we care about the person and want to spare the person from the consequences. Rather than exposing people to public shame, admonishing the sinner is about keeping people from public shame, by stopping the sin. Sometimes admonishing the sinner means that we need to explain the consequences of sin: “Here’s what will happen if you persist.” In explaining the consequences of sin, rather than setting ourselves up as all-knowing and judging, people can see that we care about them.

We must look at the situation as the prophet Ezekiel looked at it. The Lord explained that the prophet Ezekiel must be a watchman. He must warn the sinner of what will happen if the sinner does not repent. This is not easy, because admonishing the sinner might receive a backlash. The person might not want to repent, and then the prophet will be in trouble. However, as we learned from the prophet Jeremiah last week, that is what prophecy means.

Perhaps we have been in a situation in which someone warned us of the consequences of our behavior. Sometime later, we recognized that the person was right and did us a favor by pulling us away from the wrong path. What would have happened if the person had not done that, or if the person had decided that it’s your life, and so what if you go down the wrong path? Where would we be now? If we are grateful that someone was there to ensure that we did not get hurt, or did not get into trouble, then we can pay that kindness forward by helping someone else who is headed down the wrong path.

What the Lord said to the prophet Ezekiel, He says to us now: that we are ones who must watch out for others, to help them on the right path. We cannot simply watch as others go the wrong way. If we must treat others the way that we would want to be treated, then we can appreciate it when someone reached out and helped us, even though we did not know how wrong we were at the time.

As we approach the altar, we thank the Lord for His mercy towards us. We have sinned and done what is wrong, but the Lord has been merciful to us, not so much because we deserved His mercy, but out of the Lord’s infinite love for each one of us. When we see someone doing what is wrong, we remember the Lord’s mercy towards us, and we speak of the Lord’s commands, but also of His mercy, to bring people back to God. Together in Heaven, we can all be grateful together for the Lord’s kindness to us.