

## 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Ezekiel 33:7-9
<i>Response</i>	If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 13:8-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 18:15-20

The 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A takes us into the 18th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew 18 is a very important chapter because it's the fourth of Jesus' major discourses. If you recall, Matthew's Gospel has these five major speeches: the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5-7, the missionary discourse in Matthew 10, the parables discourse in Matthew 13, and — now what some scholars call — the discourse on the church in Matthew 18. The reason it's called that is because this is the second time, it's one of only two times in the Gospel that Jesus uses the word *ekklēsia*, the Greek word for church or assembly. So this is a very important passage for understanding the nature of the Church as is given to us in the Gospel. So for this Sunday the reading is from Matthew 18:15-20, it is the famous story of Jesus giving the disciples instructions on what to do when one of their brothers sins against him. So let's read the Gospel together and we will try to unpack it and put it in its first century context. In Matthew 18:15 we read:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."<sup>1</sup>

So just a couple of points about this Gospel text before we move into a more in-depth discussion of it. First, just the context. It's really important to know that although the lectionary skips ahead to the 15th verse of Matthew chapter 18, it's important to read this passage in light of the whole chapter. The whole chapter is a discourse of Jesus to his disciples. So he is speaking in particular to his students, to his disciples, to the men who have left their former lives behind and have become his followers, his students who travel with him every day to learn from him. He is speaking to the apostles in other words, and that's clear if you look at the earlier verses in the Gospel of Matthew 18. So in Matthew 18:15, when Jesus says "if your brother sins against you," he's not talking about two siblings in a family. He's talking about a brother within the community of his disciples. He is talking about conflicts between his followers, and in particular between the disciples themselves within the circle of the apostles. So whenever we read those words of his, what he's describing then is a process of fraternal correction within the Church.

So with that overarching context in mind, we see that Jesus gives, first and foremost, a three-step process for dealing with conflict, or with sin, within the Church, within the community of brothers. The first step, he says there, is that "if your brother sins against you," you should "go and tell him his fault, you and him alone." That is very important. The first step is what we might call individual fraternal correction. Before you broadcast your brother's sin to everyone in the community or you make it public, the first thing you actually should do is go one on one to speak to him alone and bring to his attention what he has done to sin against you. Now we could pause right there and do a whole discussion about how frequently Christians and disciples, followers of Jesus, fail to heed his first instruction. It is very common for us when someone sins against us or hurts someone, to immediately go and trumpet that fault or trumpet that sin to other people, to tell other people about it rather than confront the person who has

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

actually hurt us or who has sinned against us. Jesus makes very clear here, though, that authentic fraternal correction within the Church and amongst his disciples, the first step, always should be one on one correction. The point being not to shame your brother in front of everyone, but rather to let him know the wrong that he has done, with the hope of him turning away from that or repenting or asking for forgiveness, or something like that. So the first step there, step one, is individual fraternal correction — and fraternal just means brotherly correction.

However, as you probably know, it does not always happen that people repent, or that people think they have done wrong, or that people admit fault. So the second step in this process of fraternal correction that Jesus gives, is that if the one-on-one fraternal correction fails, then you shall “take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Now here we get into something very interesting. Again, the context is very clear here that when Jesus talks about not just individual correction, but group correction, he's talking about within the context of his disciples, within the context of the Church. It's almost quasi or somewhat legal language because when he says “the evidence of two or three witnesses,” he's actually alluding to the Old Testament. So if you go back to the Old Testament for just a second, in Deuteronomy 19 — this isn't the first reading for the day, but it is the background of Jesus's statement — in Deuteronomy 19:15 it says this:

A single witness shall not prevail against a man for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed; only on the evidence of two witnesses, or of three witnesses, shall a charge be sustained.

So pause there. What is that about? Basically this was the law of ancient Israelite courts, that if you were going to bring a charge of a crime against someone, especially a capital crime like murder for example, you could not be convicted on the testimony of one single witness, you had to have at least two or three witnesses for a capital case. So what Jesus here is doing is he's drawing on the law of relationships within ancient Israel in the Old Testament, and he's making them normative as well for within the Church amongst his disciples. So although you can try to correct one of your brothers one-on-one, if that doesn't work and the brother refuses to repent of his sin, then you go and you bring two or three others

in order to verify that he's unwilling to repent. If he refuses to listen, you bring the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Now sometimes even with group correction a person will remain recalcitrant or impenitent, they will refuse to repent. So Jesus says then, if he refuses even to listen to a group of disciples, then “tell it to the church.” So pause there, what does it mean to “tell it to the church”? Well, unfortunately, when we English speakers read the Bible and we see the word “the church,” we can sometimes think of a church building. That's the most common reference that people used today when they say “the church over there” or “the church on the corner,” they are usually referring to the structure, the building, in which the people of God — what we call the church — will gather. Obviously that's not what Jesus is talking about here in context. He clearly means a group of believers that he's referring to as the Church. What would that have meant in a first century Jewish context? Well the Greek word there, *ekklēsia*, literally means assembly or those who are called out. *Ek* meaning out, *kaleó* meaning to call, so those who have been called out for assembly. It's a word that's found many times in the Greek Old Testament just to refer to the people of Israel, the chosen people of God, the covenant community, especially when they are gathered together as one to worship God in the Temple. So even in the Old Testament there was a kind of connection between the church as people and then the church and the Temple building, because that's where they would gather together to worship and to hear the word of God.

So when Jesus says “tell it to the church” here, he is referring to the assembly of believers, and not just to the assembly of believers, but in particular to the assembly of authoritative leaders of those believers, because you can see here what he says is “if he refuses to listen even to the church,” then what's the penalty? “Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” What does that mean? Well effectively what it means is you treat him as cut off from the community of disciples. It is a first century Jewish way of saying you treat him as if he is excommunicated, cut off from communion with the body of disciples. And that's a very Jewish way to say it, because in ancient Judaism there were two people who were cut off from communion with the body of worshipping believers, especially in the Temple. That would be Gentiles, who couldn't enter the Temple because they were unclean, and tax collectors, who couldn't enter into the Temple because they were seen as in a perpetual state of uncleanness for working with gentiles, but also

they were known to be sinners for extorting the Jewish people, stealing from them, overtaxing them, and then using the money to fund the Roman Empire and the Roman oppressors of the Jewish people. So both Gentiles and tax collectors were excluded, they were kind of considered publicly excommunicated from the Jewish people because of their sinfulness. So what Jesus says is if within the community of disciples, if within the church someone refuses to repent of a grave sin, then you treat them like a Gentile or tax collector. They are now cut off from the Church. They are cut off from the body of believers. They are cut off from the body of Jesus' disciples, from the community of Jesus' disciples.

Now some people might think “well wow, that sounds harsh on Jesus’ part. I thought Jesus was inclusive? I thought Jesus was loving? I thought his message was one of reconciliation? And it is, but it's also one of repentance from sin. Jesus knows better than anyone else that sin is a barrier to real communion, it is a barrier to love. It damages relationships. It damages community. So he not only has a message of acceptance and love, but he also has a message of repentance. So if a person has harmed someone else, they need to recognize that they have sinned, turn from that sin, ask for forgiveness and then reestablish that relationship. You see this everywhere in the Gospels. Like in Matthew 5, earlier in the gospel, when Jesus says “if you remember you have something against your brother, put down your sacrifice before the altar and then go and be reconciled with your brother. Then come and bring your gift at the altar.” So repentance from sin is just a staple of Jesus’ message. It is no way in tension with his message of inclusivity.

In fact, as some scholars have pointed out, if you say treat the person like a Gentile or a tax collector, there is both a negative and a positive dimension. The negative dimension is that that person is excommunicated, they are cut off from the Church, they are cut off from the body of believers. The positive dimension though is how do you treat gentiles and tax collectors? How did Jesus and the apostles treat them? Well they evangelized them, they shared the good news with them. So it doesn't mean that person necessarily is permanently cut off, what it means is that they need to be evangelized again. They need the gospel to be re-presented to them so that they can be called to repentance and then re-integrated into the community. That would be a second implication of his use of the language of gentile and tax collector in this particular context. So there is both

excommunication but also evangelization implied by these two expressions that Jesus uses for an impenitent or unrepentant sinner within the Church.

Now in that context, you can understand the next verse — which is very important. In verse 18, Jesus says “truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Pause there. In an earlier video you might recall that we were looking at the same terms being used by Jesus in Matthew 16 when he gave Peter the authority to act as prime minister over the kingdom of heaven. He gave him the keys of the kingdom of heaven but he also gave him the power to bind and loose. And in that video I tried to show you that that expression was one of the foundations for Peter's primacy amongst the apostles, and also later on the development of the papacy, the idea that Peter's successors had divinely appointed authority to teach and to govern over the Church. In this context, in Matthew 18, the discourse on the Church, we see him giving the same kind of binding authority, the same kind of teaching authority, the same kind of governing authority, not just to Peter, but to the other disciples, to the other apostles as well. This is very important for us Catholics to remember. It is not only Peter and his successors, the Popes, who have teaching authority over the Church. The bishops, who are the successors to the other 12 Apostles, they have that authority as well. And where did they get that authority? They got it from Jesus, they got it from Jesus in Matthew 18.

The passage for today is one of our principal witnesses to the authority that Jesus gave to the other apostles as well. Again, I'm stressing here, notice the context, Jesus isn't giving the authority to bind and loose to 5000 people out in the desert at the feeding of the multitudes. This isn't the nameless crowds, this is his personally chosen disciples. These are his apostles, his students, that he's giving the authority. These are the foundation and the pillars of the future church. So when Jesus says to them, “whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven,” he is giving them teaching authority, but he is also giving them disciplinary authority. In context, the authority to bind someone or loose someone or, in a sense, to declare whether the person is in communion with the church, whether they are still in a relationship with the church, or whether they are cut off from the church because of their refusal to repent from their sins. Notice however, and I think I said this before, but I'll say it again, what does he not give to these other apostles? He doesn't give them the keys to the kingdom. Only Peter has the keys of the kingdom, because he

is the chief of the 12, he's the Prime Minister. The others participate in that authority, but they don't share in it in the same fullness that Peter himself has.

Now once that context is in mind, we can make some sense out of the last two verses, which frequently get taken out of context. The last two verses here says "if two of you agree on earth about anything, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." Now sometimes people might take this out of context and just say "well if two Christians agree on anything and they pray about it, then it should happen. Well no, that's not exactly what Jesus is getting at in context here. He's still talking to the apostles about the binding and loosing authority that they have, and here what he is really getting at, its primary meaning in context, is about the power of apostolic prayer, about the power of the prayer of two of his apostles when they agree on something, or when they ask the the Lord something. That is a particularly powerful prayer because Jesus has given them this special authority within the Church. You can think here about the prayer of bishops, for example, in communion with one another at an ecumenical council.

What is so important about an ecumenical council, like Vatican II or the council of Trent? Well it is because the successors of the apostles have gathered together to pray and to make binding decisions for the Church on matters of faith and morals, as well as matters of discipline. They are the two or three who are gathered in the name of Jesus, and when they gather in the name of Jesus, he's present in his apostles in a special way, in a powerful way, in an authoritative way. Now that doesn't mean we can't apply that as well to the special power of Christians praying together and asking the Lord for something in union with one another. There is always more power in prayer when we are doing it in community and not just as an individual. Christ gathers a church around himself, he doesn't gather a bunch of individuals who have a personal relationship with God that is exclusive to them and God. No, he's making a community. So we don't want to undermine that, there is a real sense in which we can apply it to that. But in its original context here, the entire passage is really about the disciples, the apostles, as the authoritative leaders of the Church, and how those apostles, united in prayer, can make binding decisions for the Church, and with regard to certain members of the Church, in particular those who may have sinned against the Church and need to be called to repentance, and maybe even need to be cut off from the community of the

Church for a time so that hopefully they might turn from their sin and then be reintegrated into the Church through evangelization.

So that is the context here of Matthew 18, that is the context of the gospel. You can see that this context explains the selection of the Old Testament readings as well. So if you go back to the first reading, it's from the book of Ezekiel 33:7-9. This is one of the scariest verses in the Bible — in my humble opinion — because it's about the grave obligation to engage in fraternal correction, which I think at least for me personally, and I think for a lot of people these days, can be really difficult in a climate of relativism, where people say “well that's your truth and I have my truth,” and where any attempt to correct somebody — especially in matters of religious faith or practice — can be seen as judgmental or as condemnatory. The very idea of fraternal correction in religious matters is almost completely taboo. Well not for the Bible. If you look at the prophet Ezekiel, he's very serious about our obligation to correct one another when it comes to matters of sin, but also matters of truth and justice. So this is what he says in Ezekiel 33:7-9:

So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked man, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way; he shall die in his iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

So what's that talking about? Well again, one of the reasons people find this so scary is because they think “oh my, I can think of lots of times where I've known someone was doing something wrong and I didn't say anything about it because I was afraid or I didn't want to hurt their feelings or I didn't want them to judge me.” And that's an application, but the first point I want to stress is that in context, who is this written to? Well it was written to Ezekiel and Ezekiel was a prophet. He was a priest as well. He was called by God to proclaim a message of conversion from sin and also of judgment to the people of Israel in the sixth century B.C., when there was lots of sin within Jerusalem and Jerusalem was going to be destroyed by the Babylonians. Ezekiel is basically calling the people of Jerusalem,



calling the Israelites, to repent, otherwise the city will be destroyed and the people will die. And in that context, what God is first and foremost — and he is speaking to Ezekiel — saying is “son of man” — that's a standard way that God has of addressing Ezekiel as a prophet — “I've made you a watchmen for the house of Israel.” So in other words, you are a prophet to the people of Israel and, therefore, you have the obligation to go and speak to those of them who are wicked and to call them out of their sin. If you're afraid to do so, they're still going to die, but you're going to be responsible for this. However, if you call them out of their sin, you call them to conversion, and they refuse to repent and they die, then you will have saved your life.

So first and foremost, this is a message to Ezekiel. As a prophet, he has a special vocation to preach the word of God in season and out of season. But at the same time, I still think that you see there is a principal for the obligation of fraternal correction that applies to the Church as well, and Jesus will utilize that in the New Testament. That is also the background to his statement to the apostles in Matthew 18, “if you see a brother who sins against you, you need to go and tell him and call him to conversion, call him to repentance.” And notice in context, that's particularly a grave obligation for who? For prophets in the Old Testament and for the apostles and their successors in the New Testament as well. So that call to conversion would be particularly grave for the successors of the apostles, who would be the bishops, the Pope, as well as to priests, who have that role of leadership within the community. And you have always seen the Church exercise that in this way. Although it does also lay, at the same time, a principal for all Christians as well. We have an obligation to engage in fraternal correction done in love to those of our brothers and sisters, especially within our families for example, or amongst our friends, who can often be the most difficult, but at the same time who, in charity, we have to recognize that if someone sinned against you, that there needs to be a process of reconciliation that begins with one on one, and then may involve others as well, all with the interest of truth and charity in mind.

Alright, the Psalm for today, in terms of the Responsorial Psalm, is one of the most popular Psalms that is utilized in the lectionary. It is Psalm 95. It is used over and over again, with the famous refrain “today if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” What does that have to do with the passages? Well I think you can see the link. Both in the New Testament Gospel and in the Old Testament reading from

Ezekiel, what's at the heart of those two is the message of repentance, of calling someone out of sin and into grace, into a life of conversion. And the primary impediment to conversion is not actually sin itself, but rather a hardness of heart. In other words, a refusal to accept the grace and the forgiveness that God always wants to offer to a sinner who is penitent. Even in the Old Testament, notice that, in Ezekiel 33, sometimes people think that the God of the Old Testament is so harsh, not like the God of the New Testament. No! Already in the Old Testament, God is very clear to Ezekiel that if the sinner repents and turns from his ways he'll live, but the prophet has that role of bringing him to repentance, of giving him that message of conversion, that message of repentance. So Psalm 95 here is saying:

Harden not your hearts, as at Mer'ibah,  
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

This refers to when the Israelites in the desert refused to repent of their sin and refused to accept the forgiveness of the Lord, and suffered judgment and many of them died in the wilderness as a result of their hardness of heart. So those are the three major readings for the day: the Gospel, the Old Testament and the Psalm. While I am at it, a quick note here just as a reminder. One of the reasons, you might have noticed, I don't spend time discussing the second reading from the New Testament — which in today's example is from Romans 13:8-10 — is not because I'm thinking it's not worthy of attention or I'm trying to neglect it, but it's because the second reading for Sundays in Ordinary Time — which is almost always taken from one of Paul's letters — is on a completely different track from the other readings. So the lectionary is constructed in such a way that the Gospel and the Old Testament reading in Ordinary Time, as well as the Psalm, all go together, they have a thematic connection that's based on walking through the Gospel of Matthew — or whatever Gospel it is — in order, reading it through semi-continuously is what is called. Well the same principle is true for the second reading, but it's by itself. It's on an independent track where you are reading through one of the letters of St. Paul. In this case we are reading through the letter to the Romans, taking passages from Romans in order. But those passages that are taken are meant to take you through the letter, they're not connected deliberately with the other readings for the day. Sometimes there are coincidental links and things like that. So for example, today it says “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Well you could link that to the reading of the Gospel, that correcting your brother should be

done in love. But the reason this reading was chosen is not to link it with the other readings, it's to take you through the letter to the Romans semi-continuously on a separate track. So that's why I don't pay as much attention to those readings, they are on an independent track. So if you've been wondering that or maybe want to know how that works, that's the reason for that.

However, when it comes to the Gospel, in closing I want to end with a few points here. How then do we interpret the text from Matthew 18 and the apostles on the power to bind and loose? Well the Catechism of the Catholic Church, in paragraph 553, has a whole section very explicitly interpreting the language of binding and loosing in Matthew 18. It basically says that in that chapter Jesus gave the apostles three forms of authority. First, the authority to reconcile us through the sacrament of confession. So sacramental reconciliation is the authority to absolve sins. So the binding and loosing refers to the apostle's ability to absolve sins or to retain them.

Second, it also refers to their doctrinal authority. The binding and loosing imagery shows that they have the authority from Christ to make doctrinal judgments. And I've mentioned this before in a previous video, that the language of binding and loosing was used by rabbis in the first century to talk about authoritative teachings. Well that's what the apostles are getting. So if you have been wondering, "why does Dr. Pitre keep quoting the Catechism? Why should I have to listen to the Catechism? What authority does that document have?" Well, I quote the Catechism because the Catechism is a compendium of the teaching of the bishops and the Pope, who are the successors to the apostles, who get their authority from Christ himself. So the authority behind the teachings of the Catechism or Vatican II and other councils, is the authority of the apostles that comes from Christ. So he gives them the sacramental power and he also gives them doctrinal power.

And then finally, the Catechism points out, he gives them disciplinary power. The language of binding and loosing also refers to disciplinary decisions, like in this case of excommunication. So in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1463, it talks about the fact that the apostles and then their successors, the bishops, have the authority to excommunicate a member of the Church who is engaged in a sin — usually a public or scandalous sin of some sort — who refuses to repent of that sin. And what excommunication means is that that person is no longer in full

communion with the Church, and it can impede their reception of the sacraments, for example, or the exercise of certain ecclesiastical actions within the church. Certain ministries in the Church would be off limits for a person who was excommunicated from the Church. So why does the Church do that? Is it trying to be mean or something? No, the Church does that because Jesus instructed the Church to do that in Matthew 18, with the goal of bringing that person back, bringing that person into repentance, bringing them through repentance to salvation.

And finally, I just would like to close here with a quote from the Catechism on Matthew 18. It's the most explicit interpretation of Matthew 18. It's in the Catechism, paragraph 1445, and this is what the Catechism says about this passage:

The words *bind and loose* mean: whomever you exclude from your communion, will be excluded from communion with God; whomever you receive anew into your communion, God will welcome back into his.

*Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God.*

This is very important, very important, because sometimes people, especially nowadays, have the notion that “well I can just go to God, but I can neglect the Church. I don't need the Church. I will just go straight to God.” It is a kind of an individualistic idea of Christianity. That was not Jesus's form of Christianity. Think about it for a second. If Jesus says that someone who refuses to repent even when the Church corrects them, that they are to be excommunicated, or that they are to be treated like a gentile or a tax collector, Jesus is presupposing one church. He can't be presupposing a situation where there are many different denominations, because if it were a denominational situation, then excommunicating someone from one church would simply mean they could just go down the street to the next church and be in communion with them. But that doesn't make any sense. Jesus's instruction to the apostles would be absurd if that were the case. No! The only way to make sense of Matthew 18 is if Jesus is founding one church on the Apostles, and that he presupposes communion, or lack of communion, with one church. And that church comes down to us through the pope and the bishops, the successors of the apostles, in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. That's why we talk about not just the Catholic Church, but the apostolic Church, all those

churches that are part of the one communion that goes back to Peter and the apostles. So I just bring that up because I think sometimes today, when people read these lines in Matthew 18, they move too quickly to an individualistic interpretation of it and they forget about the ecclesial interpretation that Jesus himself is assuming here of one church founded on the apostles, and that reconciliation with God is really inseparable from reconciliation with the one church of Christ.