

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 10, 2023

MATTHEW 18:15-20

Sister Helen Prejean, in her book Dead Man Walking, tells the real story of Lloyd LeBlanc, a Roman Catholic layman, whose son was murdered. When he arrived in the cane field with the sheriff's deputies to identify his son David's body, LeBlanc immediately knelt by his boy's body and prayed the Lord's Prayer. When he came to the words: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," he realized the depth of the commitment he was making. "Whoever did this, I must forgive them, I resolved," he later told Sr. Prejean. LeBlanc confessed that it had been difficult not to be overcome by the bitterness and feelings of revenge that welled up from time to time, especially on David's birthday. But for the rest of his life, forgiveness was prayed for and struggled for and won. He went to the execution of the culprit Patrick Sonnier, not for revenge but hoping for an apology. Before sitting in the electric chair Patrick Sonnier, the murderer said, "Mr. Le Blanc, I want to ask your forgiveness for what I did," and Lloyd LeBlanc nodded his head, signaling forgiveness he had already given. Today's Gospel reminds us and challenges us to continue on the path to forgiveness and reconciliation.

The common theme of today's readings is the impact of our membership in the Church on our "private" lives. Being members of the Church means we belong to the single Body of Christ and form a community of brothers and sisters in Christ. We are, therefore, the "keepers" of our brothers and sisters, for each one of us is important to all the others in our Faith community. That is why we have to be meaningfully present to, and take responsibility for, other people. Inhuman behavior against defenseless people, like child-abuse, elder-abuse or spouse-abuse, is something about which we need to be really concerned, to the point of taking appropriate action to protect the victims. This individual responsibility in a Christian society includes, as today's readings remind us, our responsibility for each other. Perhaps the most painful obligations of watchful love are fraternal correction and generosity in forgiving and forgetting injuries.

We are keepers of our brothers and sisters. Modern believers tend to think that they have no right to intervene in the private lives of their fellow believers; so they pay no heed to the serious obligation of encouraging an erring brother or sister to give up his or her sinful ways. Others evade the issue saying, "As a sinner, I don't have the moral courage or the right to correct someone else." But Jesus emphatically affirms that we are our brothers' keepers, and we have the serious obligation to correct one who has injured us, in order to help our neighbors retain their Christian Faith and practice, especially through our model Christian lives. Have we offered advice and encouragement to our friends and neighbors and co-workers when it was needed, and loving correction in private where that was possible? Let us admit the fact that a great part of the indifference to religion shown by our young men and women is due to lack of parental control, training, and example. If the children of Christian families grow up as practical pagans, it is mainly because the Christian Faith has meant little or nothing to their parents. It is a well-known fact that when parents are loyal to their Faith in their daily lives, their children will, as a rule, be loyal to it.

Today's Gospel reminds us of the good we can do together, and of how we can do it. Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." If any group of us will gather, work, and act with the Holy Spirit guiding us, we become much more than simply the sum of our numbers. Two becomes more than two, and three becomes more than three. The sum of our individual ideas, resources, and abilities becomes much more because of the synergy that God's Presence provides. In our Faith community, we act together so that we may help one another in God's Name, thereby multiplying our resources and ability to do what God calls us to do. Today, Jesus makes it clear how important we are, one to another. Through our links to one another in Christ, a capacity rises in our community, enabling us to draw on God's power to make healing and life-giving love more effective among us, His people. We come together, we stay together, we work together — in our Lord's Name, bringing to focus the Presence of God and unleashing the power of the Spirit — to transform our lives and the lives of all God's children.

When we gather in Jesus' name, the action opens our hearts to allow Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, to be a part of us and of what we do. That is what we experience at each Eucharist—we in Him and He in us.