

*The Wounded Shepherd*

Let us pray. *Dear Heavenly Father, who desires that all be joined to you through Jesus Christ, our Lord, send now the Holy Spirit to equip us to be good shepherds to those who are lost, so that they may be restored to the community of faith through Jesus Christ our Lord, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

The American Medical Association estimates that 4 million women are victims of severe assault by boyfriends and husbands each year. About 1 in 4 women is likely to be abused by a partner in her lifetime. Females are victims of family violence at a rate at least 3 times that of males. Studies reveal that family violence occurs in two million families in the U.S., though this is a conservative number since battering is usually not reported until it reaches life-threatening proportions. In fact some researchers estimate that one of every two women will be battered at some time in her life. 1,232 women are killed each year by an intimate partner.

My purpose in presenting you with these most unpleasant statistics is not to say that women are mistreated more than men. Though, certainly they are. No, my purpose in presenting you with these statistics is to highlight the fact that sadly and grievously we humans are darn good at hurting one another. This should come as no surprise to any of us, particularly in light of how individuals have treated one another in New Orleans (snipers, looting, rape, price gauging), that coupled with the governments' slow responsiveness. Undoubtedly, each of us sitting here has at one time in his or her life been the victim of some form of abuse, physical or verbal, from another individual, whether that be from a parent, sibling, spouse, extended family member, friend or stranger. We all have been wounded by someone. Similarly, it is probably also the case that each of us sitting here has either willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly injured someone by our words or actions.

In our gospel reading today Jesus addresses this most unfortunate fact about ourselves: the tendency to sin against one another. But, Jesus does not just leave it there. Rather, He gives us a three stage approach for addressing what an individual in the church is to do when another individual in the church sins against him or her. In other words, Jesus tells us how a Christian is to respond when a personal offense is committed against that Christian by a fellow believer.

In the first stage, as v. 15 tells us, if someone sins against you or me, we are to “*go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.*” Notice several things here. First, the offense against you occurred in private, and in kind you are to confront the individual who harmed you in private. Secondly, the sin against you must be serious and intentional to be subject to Jesus' three stage approach. Third, the sin against you must have been committed by a Christian brother or sister.

So, you go to see the individual who has sinned against you. How then are you to approach that individual? It's a tough question, isn't it? Do you run in and say, “You sorry son-of-a-gun. How dare you treat me so badly?” Or maybe the person has not sinned against you, but is sinning nonetheless. Do you confront that person, who, for example, has an addiction problem? If so, how do you do so without alienating that person? How do you do it such that the person will get help and not simply run away? Some of you, I suspect, have had to face situations like this in your own families. There is a

good way and a bad way to do this sort of thing. If you do it the bad way, the resulting alienation with that individual can last for years, where the two of you will no longer even talk with one another.

How then are we to approach the offending individual? Well, Jesus said in v. 15, “. . . *point out the fault.*” The fourth-century doctor of the church, John Chrysostom noted that: “Jesus does not say accuse him or punish him or take him to court.” Neither is it necessarily the case that we want the accused person to agree with the criticism we have raised against him or her. After all, the accused may be right and we may be wrong.

We all get sensitive from time to time? Undoubtedly, each of us has had the experience of believing someone has done us wrong—hurt our feelings, only to discover that there was neither malice nor negligence towards us. Maybe we were just tired or have projected some past, bad experience onto the presumed offender, thinking that person has done what someone had indeed wrongly done to us in the past.

Mis-communication could also explain the reason for our hurt. I like the story of the elderly couple, who were watching television. During a commercial break, the husband asked his wife, “Whatever happened to our intimate relations (intimate, by the way, is a euphemism, which Emily thought more appropriate for me to use)?” After a long thoughtful silence, the wife replied during the next commercial, “You know, I don't know what happened to our intimate relations. I don't even think we got a Christmas card from them this year!” The reason for our hurt could have been because we misunderstood what the other person meant or said.

So, getting the facts straight is important. It brings to mind Jesus' admonition in Matthew 7:5: “*First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*” Some will say, “Well, I was just being honest.” You know the line, as the individual supposedly being honest, mows you down with a verbal tirade that would put a machine gun to shame. What Jesus has told us in Matthew 7:5 is that genuine, authentic honesty is based on being honest with ourselves first, otherwise we may just be mouthing-off, shifting the blame, or scape-goating some individual. The real point of Jesus' words in our gospel reading (listen to this) is not the effect the individual's sin has had on you or me personally, but the danger in which the offending person's sin places him or her.

You see, we are to understand Jesus' words in today's reading within the context of what He said a few verses earlier in 18:12-14: “*If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.*”

Our mission in confronting a Christian brother or sister, who has sinned against us, is not so we can feel better or let-off steam. Rather, as one commentator put it, the one who is healthy must go to the one who is sick, who is lost. Essential to effecting the healing of the one who is sick, the one who has sinned, is that the individual first of all listen to us. Jesus uses the word “listen” three times in our reading. We want the individual to listen to us, be persuaded of his or her wrong, repent, and amend his or her life.

So, the aim of the confrontation is to win our brother or sister over, resulting in restoration and not punishment. To that end the minimum of publicity is used. But, if the erring brother or sister will not listen, then as Jesus tells us in v. 16, “. . . *take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*” This is the second in the three stage approach that Jesus offers.

Now, granted confrontation is not something we typically embrace with enthusiasm. It is easier to confront an individual who has hurt us personally than to confront an individual who is sinning but with no direct consequence to ourselves. No one likes getting flak. But, before we excuse ourselves too readily about not confronting an individual with his or her sinfulness, we would do well to hear how seriously St. Augustine took this responsibility. He said, "If you fail [to tell your brother or sister how he has done wrong], you are worse than he is. He has done someone harm, and by doing harm he has stricken himself with a grievous wound. Will you then completely disregard your brother's wound? Will you simply watch him stumble and fall down? Will you disregard his predicament? If so, you are worse in your silence than he is in his abuse."

Without our assistance and the assistance of others, the offending individual may not, will not, or perhaps cannot acknowledge his or her wrong-doing. In psychiatric terminology we might be talking about a sociopath, what used to be called a psychopath. Such an individual literally has no conscience, no sense of right or wrong. This kind of individual would just as soon cut your throat as shake your hand. Either is the same for the sociopath, who is very dangerous and almost beyond any kind of rehabilitation. This is not the kind of individual Jesus is talking about.

He is talking about the kind of individual who has done wrong but for whatever reason cannot acknowledge his or her guilt. The truth is, none of us likes to be wrong. We will stand on our heads and go through all kinds of contortions to justify ourselves. I am certain that everyone of us here today has done this. We justify telling a lie because, well, the truth might hurt someone or get us in trouble. Some may fudge on tax returns because, well, you needed the money. Uncle Sam has a plenty. Another may mess around on a spouse because, well, my spouse doesn't understand me. Or, at the risk of irritating you with the same old tired subject, some will say sexual relations between members of the same sex are okay as long as they occur within a committed relationship. When did a committed relationship become the standard of justification for appropriate sexual behaviour? That's not Biblical. It brings to my mind the "Dilbert" cartoon in the paper this past Monday. Dogbert says to Dilbert, "I decided to start a discount religion. The tithing would only be 5% and I'd let people sin as much as they wanted. The only problem," says Dogbert, "is that I don't want to spend time with anyone who would join that sort of religion."

If the offending individual will not listen to you, yourself, or when you take one or two others with you, then as Jesus tells us in v. 17, ". . . *tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*" This is the third stage that Jesus recommends. It sounds pretty rough, doesn't it? To treat someone as a Gentile and tax collector would involve breaking-off fellowship and hence exclusion from the community of faith. We are talking about excommunication here. These are words spoken by Jesus. Can you imagine at St. Bart's if one of you decided to get a divorce and the leadership with the support of the congregation came to you and said, "If you don't repent of getting a divorce, you will no longer be allowed to worship here." Can you imagine?

In my Doctor of Ministry program at Trinity Seminary there are also clergy from other denominations. One pastor, a Presbyterian (PCA), shared with us how at his church it was discovered that his son was doing something immoral, not criminal, but immoral. (I don't remember, but the son may have been living with a girl out of wedlock.) The elders came to his son and asked him to repent and he would not. So, the son was asked to leave the congregation. Remember this was happening to the son of my classmate, who was the pastor of this congregation. Can you imagine the personal pain of having to exclude your own child from worshipping with you. But you know what? Several years

later the son came before the elders, apologized and has been restored to good standing within the congregation. Certainly, I am not advocating such an approach, just letting you know that it is done and can be successful.

Now, lest we get confused, understand that when Jesus said, “. . . *let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector,*” He was not being prejudicial, but making a point. Remember what Jesus actually did with Gentiles and tax collectors. He loved them into repentance and transformation. Jesus is telling us that love and patient caring for the straying individual should always accompany Christian discipline.

This is hard for the church and always has been. We are quicker to discipline than restore through patient loving. Burning at the stake is less time consuming and messy. We don't like the uncertainty of waiting on a process. It is so easy for us to believe that people will never change and with good reason. I am sure many of you have watched certain individuals in your family with horror and despair. That individual has a habit, perhaps an addiction, or a life-style that is so obviously self-destructive as well as destructive to others who care for him or her. What are you to do about such an individual? Well, our immediate response is to want to knock some sense into that person. Somehow we believe if we apply enough pressure through criticism, threats and rejection, then that individual will change. But, it really doesn't work that way does it? Oh, it may seem to for a while, but then, “boom,” that individual is back to the same old habits and self-destructive behaviour.

Perhaps, we marvel at an individual's unwillingness to change, but how easy has it been for us to change the simplest of our behaviours. The season of Lent can be an unpleasant reminder of how little control we have over ourselves. When we think that giving up chocolate is a major challenge, then consider how difficult it must be for someone who has an addiction or severe maladaptive behaviour.

An Irishman named Reilly went to trial for armed robbery. The jury foreman came out and announced, “Not guilty.” “That's grand!” shouted Reilly. “Does that mean I can keep the money?”

Jesus has offered us an approach for addressing when someone sins against us or when someone has sin in his or her life. The intent of his approach is to persuade the sinner that he or she has indeed been sinning and now its time to repent. This is a matter of persuasion and not condemnation. But, if that individual, like the thief, Reilly, is not willing to admit his or her guilt and amend his or her life, then Jesus tells us we are to bring others with us to help persuade the individual and as a last resort the church is to get involved. Encouraging an individual to amend his or her sinful ways requires a loving and disciplined patience from us. Hopefully, then, we now better understand that though we have been wounded by someone, it is our Christian responsibility to confront our Christian brother or sister with his or her sin. Not in order that that person may feel bad about him or herself, but in order that that person may be reconciled to us and in the process to God as well.

So, when you think about it, it should come as no surprise that the beginning of our gospel reading starts with two people, the person sinned against and the person, who sinned, and ends with the possibility of there being only two people, wherein Jesus said, “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*” When sinner and the one sinned against are reconciled, then Jesus is there in the midst of them. That's powerful stuff. It is the stuff of which a community of faith is built. Because, in such a community, hope is available to those who seek a place that not only knows how to love, but knows how to encourage a person to be transformed as well — transformed into a person, who is better, healthier, and more Christ-like.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.