

23rd Sunday A (Matt 18:15-20)

"You always hurt the one you love, the one you shouldn't hurt at all . ." The Mills Brothers, 1957, an old song I remember from my youth. I have heard it said that the only one you can really hurt is someone you love. That of course has reference to hurt feelings. A total stranger can hurt us physically. So can a sworn enemy. But only someone we love, a trusted friend, can injure us emotionally. Others can get us angry, but they can't hurt us. The people we love most are the ones who can hurt us the most. Have you ever found out that someone you trust has been lying to you? It's not easy to get over that. Trust that has taken a long time to build can be destroyed in a moment. That hurts. Have you ever been treated unfairly by someone you love? You expected generosity. Instead you were used and abused. That's a painful experience. And the more we love the greater the pain.

Jesus talked about this in today's Gospel reading. "If your brother or sister should commit some wrong against you. . ." Not abuse from a stranger, not harm from an enemy, but hurt from a friend, from someone close to us. How do we deal with that? Do we turn our back on that person and walk away? Do we give that person the silent treatment, or carry around a secret resentment? Do we get paralyzed by fear and avoid confrontation? Do we let the resentment if continued poison our attitude?

Jesus gives us a clue to a healing attitude in our second reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans. The commandments are summed up in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Let's take a close look at what Jesus is telling us. This statement of Jesus is so often quoted that it has become trite and taken for granted. Focusing on the second part of Jesus' commandment we are met with the command to love ourselves. I'm not sure how easily most of us observe that part of the commandment, to love ourselves. Jesus comes telling us by his very life how deeply God loves each of us, powerfully and passionately. Our task is to listen to Jesus and allow ourselves to grow in a faith that tells us Jesus is right, we are loved and valued beyond measure, and in this we are empowered to love ourselves, Jesus telling us the truth about ourselves.

As specially loved men and women, each of us uniquely, we are then empowered to love our neighbor, the second part of that commandment of Jesus. This love of our neighbor can then help us to an attitude of empathy, putting ourselves in the shoes of the brother or sister who may have wronged or hurt us. Empathy thus helps us to an attitude of compassion in which we give up resentment, we give up hanging on to our hurt and woundedness, and we open our heart to talking with and listening to our brother or sister, moving toward reconciliation, healing, and a new and deeper relationship. However as we all know, reconciliation sometimes is not possible, and Jesus in our Gospel recognizes this. And having done our best, we don't have the power and control of the relationship, and must leave it up to God. The key is accepting the love of our God in Jesus Christ. And we give thanks for the abiding love of Jesus as we are fed with his loving self in the Eucharist.

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