

## *23 Sunday Ordinary Time A*

### **My Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

In all our lives there comes a time when it is necessary to take a stand in defense of ourselves. For a sensitive and thoughtful person, that can be a painful and problematic experience. Most of us would much prefer never to be faced with that necessity. What we would like to do is live in perfect harmony with everyone all the time. But of course, that does not happen. Life just isn't like that. Living as we do with other people, it is inevitable that we will get in each other's way, and step on each other's feet. Therefore, all human relationships require a certain amount of problem-solving. Adjustments must be made. Wrongs must be righted. This corrective process functions in three different ways.

Sometimes we do others wrong. Either deliberately or accidentally, we violate the rights of another person. When that is the case, it is our responsibility to seek out that person, to ask their forgiveness, and, if possible, to recompense them for the wrong that we committed against them.

At other times, we are not directly involved in the problem. It may be that we just observe a violation of human rights. In circumstances such as that, it is our responsibility to get involved, to take a stand in defense of the rights of others.

Then there is the third situation, and that is when somebody does us wrong. Of course, if the offender comes to us and seeks reconciliation,

our responsibility is to forgive him or her; and the problem is solved. But suppose they never ask forgiveness. What happens then?

Well, that is the subject of today's Gospel reading. There Jesus talks about what to do **"If your brother sins against you."** In other words, he is giving us guidance in the difficult necessity of standing up for our rights.

The first thing is to do it carefully. Be sure of your facts. Be certain that some wrong has been committed against you. Many good relationships have been damaged by quick words spoken based on a misunderstanding. When you find yourself feeling abused or betrayed, give yourself some time. Think about it, and don't worry about it. Make sure that you are not being too sensitive. This wrong that has been done to you perhaps could be overlooked. If ever there is a time that we should not overreact, it is when we are dealing with something as important as human relationships. There are enough misunderstandings in the world, let's do our best not to increase it. Before you take a stand in defense of your right, be sure of your facts and be sure it is really that important.

Another suggestion related to this idea of carefulness is don't do it too often. I can think of many places in the Bible where we are commanded to defend the rights of the oppressed. And I can think of several places where we are instructed to seek reconciliation when we have violated the rights of another. But this reading is the only one that comes immediately to mind, where we are instructed on how to defend our rights. I take that

to mean that Christ does not intend his followers to be doormats, walked on by the rest of the world. But neither does he intend us to be obsessed with the protection of our rights. If the major dedication of our lives is to defend ourselves, we probably will not get much done besides that.

Perhaps, we should take an inventory of ourselves at this point. How often do others do us wrong? Do we find ourselves frequently offended because someone has violated our rights? It could be that we are too easily offended. It could be that we have an overstated opinion of our rights. It could be that the problem is in us instead of in them. If that is the case, face it and deal with the problem where it is. We are saying that taking a stand in defense of our rights should be done carefully.

It should also be done usefully. Jesus said **“If your brother sins against you go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.”** That tells us the purpose of the entire matter - to win the brother, to save the relationship. But how many of us approach the problem with that thought in mind? How many of us are willing to make that kind of effort to preserve a relationship? When somebody does us wrong, we usually do one or more of several different things. First, we get offended: all of us do that. Next, we may worry about it or blow up about it, depending on our temperament. Then we probably talk about it, not to the offender, but to just about everyone else we can get to listen. Worst of all, some of us may

worry about it for weeks or months, then blow up and say some things that should never be said.

The approach that Jesus suggested makes so much more sense. Go to your brother, friend, or associate, talk with him or her face to face, and keep it between the two of you. Clear the air; reach an understanding if you possibly can. If that does not work, enlist the help of wise and trusted counsel.

Jesus was not interested in revenge, and he considered it unworthy of his followers. He saw no need to protect and preserve one's fragile ego. He felt no need to put the other person down. The last concern on his mind was to win an argument. All he wanted to do was to win the offending brother. With him the primary thing, the important thing was to save the integrity of the relationship.

Finally, if everything failed, he said, **“then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.”** That is a difficult statement to understand. The only way to interpret it is to remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. His door was always open. His offer of friendship was never withdrawn.

### **My Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

That is how it should be with you and me. When it becomes necessary to take a stand in defense of our rights, do it carefully and usefully. The primary thing is the relationship. Preserve it if you possibly can. If your

best efforts fail, be sure that your door to friendship is not locked from the inside. **Amen.**