

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday per Annum - A  
Ezekiel 33:7-9;  
Romans 13:8-10;  
Matthew 18:15-20  
Little Flower - 9/6/20

My Brothers and Sisters,

One Bible titles the chapter of Matthew's Gospel from which today's Gospel comes as "The Discourse on the Church." All three readings today invite us to reflect on what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ.

The church is called to be prophetic, i.e., to teach and to challenge. In today's first reading, God told the prophet Ezekiel that he had appointed him watchman for the house of Israel. His mission was to challenge the people to turn away from sin and to turn back to God. Jesus was prophet, priest, and shepherd king. As a prophet, Jesus revealed God to us, us to ourselves, and God's plan of salvation for us. The church, then, must continue to reveal God and Jesus to us and us to ourselves and challenge us to turn away from sin and to turn back to God.

In John's Gospel, Jesus said, "*I am the way and the truth and the life*" [14:6] and "*the truth will set you free*" [8:32]. In the same Gospel, Pilate said to Jesus, "*What is truth?*" [18:38]. Pilate's question is the church's unique challenge today when so many people do not acknowledge any truth but personal truth.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul suggests that the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian community should be love for one another. We know from history that it was the love of the early Christians for one another that drew people to Christ and the church even during times of persecution.

According to Paul, whoever loves keeps all the commandments, fulfilling the whole law, because love does no evil to anyone. In a recent homily, I mentioned four stages of faith development. The Old Testament suggests three stages of moral development. When God established the Old Testament covenant with Israel, he promised to make Israel his chosen people and give them their own land if they kept his commandments. When children are young, parents tell them what they can and cannot do, what they must and must not do. In the second stage, the prophets called the people to make their own and live the attitudes and values of God in their relationships with others. As we get older, Christian morality is about making our own and living in our relationships with others the attitudes and values Jesus taught and lived. Finally, in the third stage, our morality is rooted in love. Jesus called us to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love one another as he has loved us, i.e., sacrificially. Unfortunately, some Christians never move beyond the laws and rules.

In the real world, of course, Christians sin against each other. As Christians we are called to be healers and reconcilers. Therefore, in today's Gospel, Jesus outlines a process of reconciliation. First, he suggests two people try to resolve their differences without involving others. If they cannot, then one or two others are involved as witnesses. Finally, if they still cannot resolve the issue, then the Church becomes involved. Unfortunately, today social media magnifies every wrong, every difference, every disagreement. As Christians, we would do well to follow Jesus' teaching on reconciliation.

My brothers and sisters, the most powerful verse in all three readings is the final verse of today's Gospel: "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*" Because the previous verse mentions prayer, we could read it to mean that Jesus is present when Christians are gathered in prayer, and certainly this is true. Jesus is never more present than we celebrate Eucharist. However, I really believe that Jesus was telling us that whenever and wherever Christians are trying to live Christian lives with others, Jesus is present, especially when we love others sacrificially.