

23 Sunday Ordinary Time "A" September 7, 2008

Now that we have a hockey mom, a pit bull with lipstick, running for vice-president, can't we at least have a Gospel that says, "If your brother or SISTER sins against you...?" What's with the masculine, ladies?

Here's the reason: in the Gospels, "brother" is a code word for "member of the church." This is not a gospel about your blood brother who didn't show up, your next door neighbor who won't cut his weeds; it's not advice for dealing with the boss at work or the clown who thinks Rt. 125 is the Kentucky Speedway.

No. Jesus is talking about believers--members of the church--who are doing wrong, who are hurting others and the community. Almost every parish has people problems: turf wars, hurt feelings, misunderstandings, wild rumors, selfishness. It's I guess comforting to realize that even back in 85 AD, when this Gospel passage was written, the members of Matthew's church were hurting one another.

God said to the Prophet Ezekiel: "If someone is wicked, and you do not try to stop them, then I/God will hold YOU responsible for their death." What could this mean to us Christians? It means that we are responsible for one another!! It means that if we see parish members hurting themselves or one another, and if we look the other way--if we do nothing and don't even try to stop that wrong, then God will ask us this question: *didn't you love them enough* to try to help them become better?

A year ago, I greatly offended two parish members. It was right before festival, and at the end of the 5:00 pm Mass, I held up a flyer for Texas Hold Em, which is a high stakes poker--serious gambling. Three minutes after Communion, still in the sanctuary, still in the sacred vestments, promoting Texas Hold Em. Who knows what visitors were here.

The two were very angry with me. They had several choices: 1) they could have tried to be nice, to avoid a confrontation, avoid hurting my feelings--which would have meant that I would have done the same thing for two more liturgies. 2) they could have told 10 other people what a jerk I am, and those 10 would have each told 5 more. 3) they could have written the Archbishop. 4) they could have written me an anonymous note. 5) they could have left the parish. Lots of Catholics do that. That's why they call us Roamin' Catholics; we seem get angry about something, then roam in search of a more perfect parish.

Instead, they came to me, and forcefully explained how awful it was to see me at the altar, waving around that gambling paper. They were right, of course, I was wrong. I apologized and thanked them for helping me to get things right.

It is much easier to look the other way. Most people don't enjoy confrontations. The other person may get very angry with us. Who are we to speak to someone who is nearly always late for the liturgy, or who regularly walks out just a few seconds after Communion, or who is spreading a bit of gossip?

Well, I learned a lot from that couple, and thank goodness for them.

Can we help one another to be good? Can we help this parish to be better people? Can we speak to one another humbly, and with love, but in truth? Ezekiel would notice this parish. Matthew would notice this parish. Jesus would be so pleased with us.