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First published in 1973

Edited and published by the Public Relations
Department of the Catholic Seta Parish
Council 4-16-1 Seta, Setagaya-ku, Tokyo



Today's Word

The Twentythird Sunday, Year A (6 September)

Parish Priest: Father Hiroshi Konishi

First Reading: Ezekiel 33:7 - 9

Second Reading: Romans 13:8 - 10

Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:15 - 20

Reflections on the three readings:

The First Reading uses hypothetical language—"if..."—to clarify the mission of the watchman (the prophet): the duty to speak the necessary words. God does not desire the destruction of the wicked; rather, He desires that they live. Therefore, one must convey this true heart of God.

The Second Reading introduces the concept of a "debt." Debts owed to others must be repaid. As it is written: "Pay to all what is due them—tribute to whom tribute is due, tax to whom tax is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due" (Romans 13:7). However, the debt of love—the obligation to love—is one we cannot repay on our own. No matter how much we love our neighbor, we can never fully repay the debt of having been loved by God. Such is the magnitude of God's love.

The theme of today's Gospel is not merely about admonishing or rebuking a brother who has committed a sin or fault against us. Rather, the goal is to offer counsel so that he does not perish because of sin, does not drift away from the faith community because of sin, and does not cease to be a brother because of sin. If one person fails, try with two; if two fail, try with three; and if that still fails, go through the Church. In this way, the Father's will—to give life to people—is realized. The true theme of the Gospel is "gaining a brother."

From Matthew 16:21 onwards, the Gospel depicts Jesus as He moves toward the Cross. The narrative unfolds as follows: the first prediction of the Passion (16:21 - 23) → the Transfiguration (17:1 - 13) → the second prediction of the Passion (17:22 - 23) → and the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven and the Church (community) (Chapter 18). Thus, the entirety of Chapter 18 focuses on the theme of human relationships within the community of faith gathered around Jesus.

Please take note of the word "brother" in verse 15. This does not refer to a biological sibling but rather to someone who shares the same faith. It rephrases terms used earlier—"one of such little children" (v. 5) and "one of these little ones" (v. 10), as well as the "little ones" mentioned in the immediately preceding verse ("so it is not the will of your Father in heaven that even one of these little ones should perish," v. 14)—as "brother."

Furthermore, the Greek word **ean**—meaning "if"—appears five times between verses 15 and 17. This seems to detail the specific situations found within the faith community of that time. Indeed, the community actually included brothers who "sinned," brothers who "listened," brothers who would not "listen," brothers who "still would not listen," and brothers who would not "listen even to the church." Then, in verse 18, a conclusion is presented with the phrase "Truly I tell you."

The word "sin" in verse 15 can be understood as a "fault" or "transgression." The "stray sheep" mentioned just before this passage (vv. 10-14) refers to the "brother" who has committed a sin. Since God cares for such "little ones," that fact must be made known to the "brother." That is what constitutes "admonition." In this way, the "little one" who has sinned becomes a "brother."

Let us look further at verses 16 and 17. Regarding the phrase "if he does not listen" in verse 16: if the person does not heed a single "admonition," one must "admonish" them repeatedly in order to "gain the brother." The process must be carried out first by the individual alone, and then by two "brothers." Thus, the phrase "established by the testimony of witnesses" in verse 16 reflects the Father's desire that "not even one of these little ones should perish" (verse 14). The Franciscan translation encloses the words "everything is confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses" in quotation marks, as this passage echoes Deuteronomy 19:15.

Furthermore, the word "church" in verse 17 originally signifies an "assembly of those called together." Of course, the Church did not yet exist during Jesus's time; the background here likely reflects the practices of the faith community—specifically regarding how they dealt with a brother who had committed a "sin"—at the time the Gospel was written. However, since the entire eighteenth chapter consists of Jesus's teachings to His disciples and outlines the nature of the faith communities they would go on to establish in various places, we can interpret "church" as the faith community and view these words as a command from Jesus.

In this light, the seemingly small phrase “you” in verse 18 takes on significant meaning. It refers to the disciples. In other words, the disciples—entrusted with the role of leaders within the faith community—are granted the same authority as head of the Church that was given to Peter in Matthew 16:19. The mission of the Church becomes the fulfillment of the Father’s will and purpose.