

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) 2020

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So, there were two brothers who lived on adjoining farms. After 40 years of farming side-by-side, sharing machinery and trading labor and goods as needed without a hitch, the two brothers fell into a serious rift. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference and finally, it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence. One morning there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days' work", he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there I could help with? Could I help you?" "Yes", said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor. In fact, it's my younger brother! Last week there was a meadow between us. He recently took his bulldozer to the river levee and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll do him one better. See that pile of lumber by the barn? I want you to build me a fence, an 8-foot fence – so I won't need to see his place or his face anymore." The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you." The older brother had to go to town, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day – measuring, sawing and nailing. About sunset when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job. The farmer's eyes opened wide; his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. It was a bridge! A bridge that stretched from one side of the creek to the other! A fine piece of work, handrails and all! And the neighbor, his younger brother, was coming toward him, his hand outstretched. "You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge, and then they met in the middle, taking each other's hand. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox onto his shoulder. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you", said the older brother. "I'd love to stay on", the carpenter said, "but I have many more bridges to build." This story is a good illustration of what all 3 readings touch on. In the first reading the prophet Ezekiel said, "If... you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from his way, the wicked shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death." Very strong words!! Then in our second reading, St. Paul tells the Romans, "Love does no evil to the neighbor." And finally, in the Gospel Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone." In the seminary, we referred to this as fraternal correction, which is correcting a brother or sister who is being led astray from the many teachings of JC. Edmund Burke, the great British statesman once said, "All that is needed for evil to prosper is for good men to remain silent." This

is really the point that Jesus is trying to make. However, I think there are 3 things that we should keep in mind when it comes to speaking out against evil. First of all we need to be tactful. Like the old song says, "It ain't what you do. It's the way you do it that gets the result." My mother always says, she had 2 sons; each could say the same thing. My brother and I could say the same thing to someone but somehow our delivery causes different results. In order to be tactful, perhaps you could write a short letter where you could calmly weigh your words carefully and lovingly. Perhaps you could schedule a time to take a short hike with someone to gently explain the wrongdoing. The second point is that speaking out may not bring a personal reward until long after the confrontation. Are you a good enough friend to tell someone that they are destroying their life by some addiction and that you are there for them when they are willing to take the measures to stop their addiction. They may hate you until years later after they have quit and they realize that it was your loving words that made them act in the right direction. Often our words of wisdom or encouragement, even offered in love, fall on deaf ears. So, the final point is to pray for the person. As a matter of fact, even before we dare to offer advice or criticism to another, we should pray for the right words and then if we are pushed off or told to mind our own business we should keep on praying for them. I have a couple of priest friends that we have a mutual plan to call one another when we have a situation and we pray together over the phone. Jesus said in the Gospel, "Again, amen, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my Heavenly Father." So, three points to help with fraternal correction. One, be tactful; two, don't expect immediate reward; and three, pray, especially as 2 or 3 intentionally gathered together. That's a way for us to be like that carpenter who was hired to build a fence to divide and separate, but instead he built a beautiful bridge to allow a meeting in the middle.