

Homily based on the readings from September 10, 2023 (Ezekiel 33.7-9; Romans 13.8-10; Matthew 18.15-20)

My favorite poet – at least when I was in high school and college – was John Donne, a scholar, soldier, and clergyman who lived in the 16th and 17th centuries. Even if you have never heard his name before, I suspect you are familiar with a few lines from one of his most famous poems:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main ...

In other words, all human beings are bound together – our lives are intertwined and interdependent.

There are many ways in which we experience these kinds of connections. We all live in families and local communities, where our actions concretely affect the daily lives of other people – whether at home, at school, at church, or in some other public forum. Many of us work in professions where our success depends on the efforts of people

we may never even meet. With the advent of digital communication and social media, we have become acutely aware of the connectedness – in both a positive and a negative sense – of human beings across the globe.

The ties that bind us, though, run deeper than just personal or economic attachment. You may recall the end of John Donne's poem:

... any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Our obligations to each other transcend both commerce and coexistence. We are not just cohabitants and coworkers, but brothers and sisters. As children of God, made in his image and likeness, we all share a common heritage and a common destiny. We are obliged to seek each other's welfare, not just in this world but in the world to come. The death of one person, physically or spiritually, diminishes us all.

The obligation we owe each other can be summarized by one very simple – but often misunderstood – word. That word is *love*. In his Letter to the Romans, Saint Paul reminds us – as Christ himself had done – that the entirety of the law can be summarized by a pair of simple principles, the second being: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” All the specific evils that the law prohibits – adultery, murder, theft – can be viewed as particular failures in our love for God and for other people. Saint Paul makes the following observation: “Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, *love* is the fulfillment of the *law*.”

One of the greatest impoverishments of our modern age is the degradation of the word *love*. Within the framework of intimate relationships, the term has been corrupted to mean a transitory feeling or an emotional state. That misconception is one of the main reasons so many marriages fail. While love may sometimes coincide with a particular set of emotions, that is not what love actually *is*. Love is a *decision*, an active choice that is reaffirmed on a daily basis.

Another common misunderstanding within our society is that love must be uncritical; if we love somebody, so the argument goes, we must let that person do whatever he wants to do – be whoever he wants to be. A popular quotation, sometimes attributed to the Dalai Lama, states that “Love is the absence of judgment.” That notion is dangerously misguided. By its very nature, love establishes an obligation, which cannot simply be ignored out of convenience or politeness. Today’s reading from the Prophet Ezekiel is quite clear: “[if] you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from his way, ... I will hold you responsible for his death.” That is a tremendous – and incredibly daunting – responsibility. No matter how noble our intentions, failing to share the truth with someone who needs to hear it is actually a form of *cruelty* – like a medical doctor withholding an unwelcome diagnosis for fear of causing offense or distress.

We have to be extremely careful, though, about the manner in which we attempt to “dissuade the wicked.” The point is not to win the *argument*, but to win the *person*. Yelling and brow-beating will never

work, and are almost guaranteed to push a person further away. The only viable starting point is to develop a relationship – an encounter of love – with the individual we are trying to convince. That type of interaction requires a great deal of work – not to mention patience and courage – but it is the only way authentically to exercise love in this type of situation. Today’s Gospel reading makes this point explicitly: “go and tell [your brother] his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.”

As some of you may be aware, I was received into the Catholic Church as a young adult. When I was still a Protestant, the vast majority of Catholics I met were extremely courteous, extremely circumspect – and extremely unhelpful in my process of conversion. Nobody was willing to violate the rules of polite society to tell me why I should become Catholic – and, to be fair, I would not have reacted well if someone had tried to do so. One of the most important events in my life was when a ninety-year-old nun pulled me aside, a smile beaming across her wrinkled face, to tell me that I was a lovely man but that everything I

believed was completely and totally wrong. Although I did not enjoy that interaction as it was happening, I would hate to imagine what my life would be like now if it had not taken place. While that specific moment was unique and unrepeatable, that nun – Sister Frances Rita – exemplified one of the fundamental responsibilities of being a Christian. To borrow a phrase from Saint Paul, we must all commit ourselves to *speaking the truth in love*.

Today, as we come together to share in the Eucharistic banquet, let us remember that we are not *only* partaking in the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, but we are also uniting in Holy *Communion* with our Risen Lord – and with each other. None of us is an island. The bonds of love we experience here and now – whenever two or three are gathered together – are simply a foretaste of the joy that awaits us in God’s kingdom, where “perfect love and oneness reign.” As Catholics, it is our responsibility – it is our privilege – to invite all our brothers and sisters to *join with us* in the transfiguring radiance of Christ’s love.