

Taking Care of Business

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: there are few things we Americans value more highly than our individual liberty and our right to personal privacy. It was pounded into our heads from grammar school on how colonial patriots fought and shed their blood for these rights we now enjoy, and how we should never allow anyone to take them from us. So effective is this indoctrination that by the time we reach the age of majority we all have the general sense that as long as it isn't illegal (and sometimes even if it is) how I choose to live my life, and whatever I elect to do or not to do is nobody's business but mine. What's more, because you possess the same rights, it's only proper that I extend that same consideration to you. What you do or don't with your freedom is entirely up to you. Unless it's harming me or someone else directly, then have at it. It's not my concern. And we zealously guard these rights. We're careful that no one trample upon them or trespass into our personal space. If anyone dare, we let them know it by telling them to back off. "What's it to you?" we say. "Mind your own business!"

That's the way it is in this world. But Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." And as we've been seeing for the past several weeks, part of our growing in Christian faith and life means changing our way of thinking from a worldly to a heavenly understanding of things – which is almost always exactly opposite. That was evident last week when we saw the inverted scale of attaining greatness in God's kingdom. Here in this world greatness is achieved by accumulating wealth, prestige, and power. You've got to climb your way to the top and that means getting above everyone else – or at least as many as you can. But Jesus says, no, in God's kingdom one becomes great by *descending* and serving others. The greatest of all, he said, is the one who willingly becomes the servant of all. It's the world's way of thinking turned on its head; and yet we see that it's true because it's exactly what Jesus himself did. He's been lifted to the highest place in God's kingdom precisely because he gave himself completely for us, serving us as the lowest and most despised of slaves by enduring our shame and punishment on the cross. Now, as the members of his body, we achieve true greatness in God's kingdom in exactly the same way: through our humble service for others.

That's where *last week's* readings took us. This week's readings reveal another upset to our normal way of thinking. We treasure our individual liberty and personal privacy; but today's lessons show that part of our growth in the body of Christ is recognizing our responsibility for all of the other members of his body. In the body of Christ, none of us can afford to think of ourselves as being on our own. We are not a loose association of individuals; rather we are joined together into a *community*, a *family*, a *fellowship* of faith, in which we are intimately linked one to another. When one suffers, we all suffer. When one has needs, we all respond to it. When one who is in sin repents, we all rejoice – as we do also when one of us dies in the faith and moves on to be with Christ in glory. For the Christian it can never be "just me and Jesus". No, it's me, Jesus, and *everyone else* who is one with him. We're all in this together.

What that means is that the individual liberty and personal privacy we value so highly and work so stubbornly to protect often stand exactly at odds with our responsibility to and for one another. To be more blunt, what you or I as a Christian elect to do or not to do and how we might choose to live life can be and very often is very much the business of everyone else who is part of the body of Christ. We have a duty to be concerned about, look after, and try to improve each other's spiritual health. What you do or don't do can very much have an adverse

effect on someone else's walk of faith. When that happens then your individual liberty has got to take second place. Christian love demands that none of us has the right to do something that negatively impacts the discipleship and faith of another.

This is stated emphatically in today's Gospel where Jesus says, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea." A better translation would be: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me *to stumble or be tripped up*" – which may be to stumble into sin, but it could also mean to stumble into error and false belief. Either way, we ought not to do it because it could have eternally disastrous consequences for the person we are guilty of influencing in a negative way.

How do we do this? Well, first and most obviously, by overt encouragement or blatant temptation to sin. It's not possible to calculate how much mischief and bad conduct that takes place is the direct result of someone who really knows better saying, "I dare you to ..." And, of course, the reason a person issues such a dare is twofold. First, to witness and take wicked delight in the trouble thus created; but perhaps even more to enjoy the sense of moral superiority that comes of seeing someone else do what he wouldn't do himself. You can feel better about yourself if you see that others are worse sinners than you. In a similar way, there's satisfaction to be gained by introducing the young and naïve into various forms of vice that you might be caught up in. You can justify your own bad behavior if you can get other people to join you in it. If everybody's doing it, it can't be that bad, right? One can only wonder how many lives have been ruined by drugs, or the wide panorama of deviant sexual practices and addictions, or who knows what else, simply because someone said soothingly, "Oh, go ahead. Try it. You'll see. It's not so bad. And I guarantee, you're gonna like it."

But such temptations are not the only way we can cause someone else to stumble and fall. We are constantly influencing others by the example we set before them. This is true for everybody to some degree; but it's especially true of parents, grandparents, and others who have responsibility for the rearing and instruction of children. Don't fool yourself: they're watching you. And they are learning for better or for worse how to live, how to deal with issues, and what it means to you to be a Christian. It forces the question: What kind of example are *you* setting? In your daily devotional life, in the way you treat your spouse, in the way you approach weekly worship, in the words you say and how you behave, in the way you conduct your business ... is your example one worthy of imitation? To the extent that it is not, *you* are guilty of leading others into sin.

It goes beyond just the example you set by your own conduct. It spills over into the tacit approval you grant to another's sin or error by your silence, by your not making the correction or giving the warning or rebuke that should be given. If you know something is wrong and you see someone involved in it and you fail to speak up then you might as well be sitting on the sideline cheering them on because that's the way it will be interpreted. In my own calling, part of this involves keeping up with the new books, developments, and fads in popular theology that continuously sweep through the Christian community. I know it doesn't always make people happy when I point out the errors and potential dangers with whatever is the latest supposedly Christian bestseller or fad, or another denomination's system of theology; but it's my job. To fail to do so would be negligent to you and unfaithful to the calling God has given me. In the same way you who have friends or relatives who claim to be Christian and yet are living outside of the boundaries of the Law of God – your failure to warn, rebuke, and correct them is itself a sin—the very sin that Christ our Lord here so emphatically condemns.

Better, he says, for you to be drowned with a millstone hung around your neck in the deepest depths of the sea. The translation we have doesn't quite capture the force of what he's saying. I mean, no one wants to go swimming with a weight tied around their neck; but the millstone he refers to here is not the five pound hand mill that would have been in every home for the grinding of grain into flour, but rather what's literally called a "donkey stone" – a stone disk maybe four feet across and nine inches deep used at the community mill, which would be turned round by a pair of donkeys tied to a long shaft of wood. With one of those around your neck you'd go straight to the bottom fast and you'd never come up – so it's pretty clear what he means: this is deadly serious business not just for the person who's been led astray but also for you who through your action, your example, or your inaction helped lead them there. My guess is that at this point we all have cause to consider our past and present failures and repent.

And receiving once again Christ's sure word of forgiveness by the blood he shed for our redemption, we rise with the resolve to do better in the future. Clearly we want to avoid leading others astray by tempting them to sin. That's a no brainer. And we'll want to set a better example in all that we do. We'll use our liberty more judiciously. Just because I'm free to do or not to do something doesn't mean it's good for you. There my freedom ends. Your spiritual wellbeing trumps my freedom every time. And too, finally, we must come to this sticky issue of speaking up to and correcting those who have strayed.

And that's going to lead us smack dab against someone else's right of personal privacy; because you know already what's the first thing you're going to hear when you open your mouth. They are going to say, "Why don't you mind your own business?" It will likely be followed by such choice rejoinders as, "Who are you to judge me?" "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." And any number of others that ought not be spoken from the pulpit in the Church of Christ. I'm sure you've heard them all. Perhaps you've said some of them yourself. But here's the point: if someone who claims to be a Christian is in sin or error *then it is your business*. Our fellowship in Christ makes it so. Christian love and compassion demand that we attempt to do all that is in our power to bring them back. In today's Epistle, we heard St. James say, "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." That's pretty plain. A Christian's right to personal privacy ends with sin and false belief. At that point it becomes the business of every one of us – but in particular the ones who know about it. We're not to go around ruining reputations by spreading the word of someone's sin; we're supposed to deal with it as privately as possible. But if you know about it, then it's up to you to act.

Now, lest I be misunderstood, I'm not suggesting that we hold inquisitions, or go on witch hunts, or start spying on each other. That's not what this is about. It's about looking out for one another in Christian love. It's about making sure that we all make it to the goal together. The spiritual wellbeing of your brothers and sisters in Christ is Christ's business – and that makes it your business. We're all in this together and we ought to be helping and serving each other. And part of your own growth in Christ is increasingly to see and act upon your responsibility to help others along the way – as indeed they will be helping you.

"Have salt in yourselves", Jesus tells us in conclusion. He's referring to the preservative power of salt. In a day without freezers or refrigeration it's what they used to keep meat from decaying. So what he's saying is that we ought to be preserving one another in the body of Christ to keep them from decay. That's what sin and false belief do. They cause parts of the body to rot away and be lost – and it causes the whole body to suffer and to stink. That's what happens when we fail to preserve one another. Therefore let us have salt in ourselves – the

salt that recognizes that by preserving one another in holy faith and Christian virtue we are taking care of business; and that through the precious blood of Christ our Lord we are helping to save sinners from death and covering a multitude of sins. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!