

“Listen Up...or Watch Out!”  
The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost  
Gail Sheddy – September 7, 2009

*Exodus 12:1-14*

*Psalms 149*

*Romans 13:8-14*

*Matthew 18:15-20*

A couple of weeks ago Gordon and I were having dinner with friends at their home. As we were clearing the table and doing the dishes after our meal, it was announced that everyone was going on a pontoon boat ride on Burntside Lake. This was somewhat unexpected because I had other things on my agenda. Consequently, I announced that I would not be going...that I would be going home to spend some time working on a sermon that was due in a couple of weeks. I had put it off and I had decided that tonight was the night...regardless of what else came up. One of the visitors said “Oh. And what is the subject of your sermon?” I gave her an overview of today’s gospel and she answered me by saying “Oh. The one about intervention.”

It hadn’t occurred to me that Jesus’ instructions to his disciples on how to deal with one who sins was a type of intervention but the more I thought about it, the more I decided that indeed this way of dealing with conflict was a practice we could put into place in our daily lives.

How would it work? How would “interfering” produce the results we might be looking for? Or would it? And when would we use it to resolve a problem we might be facing?

We do not live in a perfect world. A day does not go by when we are not confronted with something or someone with whom we disagree. We don’t like what the Democratic Presidential Nominee is promising. We disagree with the way the Republican Candidate’s stand on how he is going to bring our troops home. We didn’t like the way the Bishop handled the discipline of a particular priest. We are upset that it didn’t rain over the Labor Day week-end. Some of these disagreements are minor...some are major. And how we respond will differ depending on the degree of difficulty in resolving the issue and if it is in our realm of possibility to resolve the issue at all.

I think you would agree that most of us would rather avoid facing off with someone than meeting someone head on. We think the situation will change...or it doesn’t bother us that much...or someone else will handle it. We would rather leave things alone than deal with them.

But if there is something crucial that must be resolved not only in our personal lives but within our community...our family...our church...we need to be prepared to act, to listen, to come to some understanding that will fix the problem. We need to do this not only ourselves but all others in our “community” are spared from a continuation of anguish, despair, and hurt that has already occurred.

We need to step up and listen. And the “sinner” better watch out.

Bear in mind, you, too, may have to step up and listen as well..

The first inkling that this approach might be different than others is the focus on who does it.

Jesus tells his disciples that if another member of the church sins against you...you should be the one who takes the first step. It is you who should be the one to step forward and have a discussion with the “sinner” ...not someone else.

Can you think of a time when you have hoped that someone else would be the first one to make the approach? How many times have you said “Oh, I hope I don’t have to be the one?” But doesn’t it make more sense that you be the one to call the matter to the “sinners” attention, to iron out the problem? And if he listens and agrees to mend his evil ways, you have brought him back into the fold of the community and can rejoice in how everything worked out.

If Cole is upset with Sam because Sam always takes his book from the library to read first, it is just as easy for Cole to let it go rather than cause a scene. Or he could ask his mom to tell Sam to knock it off. But the best way to handle this would probably be Cole talking to Sam and asking him to refrain from “borrowing” his library books without asking.

When this happens, it is possible that Sam may turn around and call Cole on something he does without asking. In otherwords, it may not have been only Sam that “sinned” but Cole as we well

But if he doesn’t listen, ...the “sinner” you will have to try something else. You have to get two or three others to enter into the discussion, to act as witnesses to what you and the “sinner” are saying to one another so you are not alone in resolving the problem.

So maybe Cole enlists Nick and Thomas to hear his plea.

Here again, Jesus suggests that additional help will give both you and the “sinner” a means to justify an end. If he listens, great. If he still does not want to resolve the conflict, your next step is to get the entire church...or family... involved. And if, once again, the offender refuses to listen, you know you have done all that you can do and the “sinner” will be cast out...and treated like a Gentile or a tax collector.

And is your obligation finished at that point? I would say “no”. Because Jesus reached out to the Gentiles and the tax collectors, much to his disciples dismay, and made them aware that they were welcome in his “community”. Isn’t he asking the same of us?

We will do our best to bring the sinner around. And even if we are not successful, we can know we will keep our doors open to him, knowing that there may be a time when our welcoming voice, our open arms will provide the encouragement for him (or her) to mend those evil ways.

Did we intervene? Did we interfere? Did we follow Jesus teaching? I think we did. While things may not have worked out the way we wanted them to, at least we didn't sit on our hands, waiting for someone else to act.

We did something.

And we will pray together that the sinner does listen, will change and ask God for His forgiveness. And when that happens, we will be rejoice.

Recently, I have been acutely aware of another "term" that could apply to these teachings of Jesus. Over and over again in the past several months, I have heard the term "reconciliation" used by the leaders of our church. Our Anglican Communion is being pulled apart by those who do not think the blessing of same sex marriages and the ordination of gay bishops should be condoned. As bishops from around the world met in England for the Lambeth Conference last month, it was the hope of many that there could be discussion that would end in reconciliation. If you read Bishop Jelenek's final letter to the Diocese, it would appear that, while progress was made, reconciliation did not happen. The conflicts...the differences were not resolved in an amicable fashion. Even after taking the steps Jesus laid out for his disciples, those hoping for reconciliation were disappointed...the dissenters still were unmoved. As Jelinek indicated, the Anglican Communion as we have known it in the past, may not be the Anglican Communion we will know in the future. Time will tell.

We are fortunate here at St. Mary's that we have not had to deal with many serious conflicts as our team ministry grows. We know of others who are not as fortunate as are we.

Let us pray that the "sinner" in the midst of the community will listen and take heed after we follow Jesus teachings.

Once the conflict is resolved, we will thank God for his part in the intervention, in the resolution, in the restoration of our faith. For, as the gospel tells us, where two or three are gathered in His name, He will be there among us, answering our call.

And He is with us.

Watch out! Listen up!

