

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A

Saint Margaret Parish, Bel Air

September 4, 2011

“Did He Hear Your Love?”

Recently, a father discovered a half-empty bottle of wine in his teenage son’s bedroom.

The father reacted quickly, *“How did this get here?”* The son mumbled, *“I don’t know.”*

The father got angrier: *“I’ll give you one minute to come up with a better answer than that.”* The son: *“It belongs to a friend of mine.”*

The father: *“Do you expect me to believe that?”* Immediately the son walked out of the house and slammed the door behind him.

Things got worse, and eventually the father called the counselor at his son’s school. The counselor first asked the father why he was so concerned about the wine and he replied, *“I don’t want him to get into trouble.”*

The counselor then asked the father why he didn’t want his son to get into trouble. The father answered that he didn’t want his son to get into legal trouble or to get addicted to alcohol and ruin his future.

Again, the counselor pushed the father about the reason for his concern. Finally, he responded, *“I love my son and I want the best for him.”*

And to that the counselor asked, *“Do you think that your son got that message?”* And the father sadly replied *“No!”*

Scripture

That incident helps us to appreciate today’s Scripture readings.

The passages call us to address situations where someone is doing something that is wrong or harmful or offensive. The Scriptures give three helpful principles to guide us.

Three Principles

First, we need to make sure our motives are pure. We need to be careful that we are not trying to put others down or get back at them.

Our motive needs to be either the well-being of the other person, like that father for his son, or reconciliation with the other person, like talking with your spouse about something that is bothering you in the relationship. Saint Paul says today that in what we do, we need to be grounded in love.

So, in our approach, we need to ask more than accuse, to speak quietly rather than loudly, and to seek agreement rather than argument. We need to be pure in our motives.

Second, we need to begin by trying to work things out one-on-one. This is the most respectful and least confrontational way of proceeding, and it minimizes defensiveness in the other person.

If this does not work, then we can bring in third parties. Third parties can be family members, friends, a counselor, or a priest.

Alcoholics Anonymous advocates this and calls it an intervention. But always, the goal must be pure: to respectfully persuade the other person that they are going in the wrong direction or to help reconcile two people.

And the third principle is that we never give up on another person. In the gospel, Jesus says that if a person will not listen to third parties, then *“treat them as you would a tax collector or gentile.”*

Here the gospel means that we should do what Jesus does with the tax collectors or gentiles. And what does he do?

Jesus does not exclude or excommunicate or refuse to have anything to do with them. On the contrary, he makes a point of hanging out with them and giving his time to them and even having dinner with them.

Now, no question, with children and youth, we need to provide direction and rules. And no question, in case of some type of abuse or things like that, with adults we have to protect ourselves and others.

But in general, the direction that the gospel gives is to respect freedom and allow space for the other person to have a change of heart. Our goal is inclusion and growth, not exclusion and put downs.

Conclusion

So, the Scripture gives us some practical principles about how to proceed in these real-life situations. To some extent, these are common sense.

They are also verified and confirmed by contemporary psychology. But we can easily forget them and I hope going over them is helpful for us today.