

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 10, 2017

+

You don't need me to tell you people respond to situations in a variety of ways. Reactions to misbehavior are a case in point. If a passenger on a bus begins to act obnoxious, many people will simply raise the morning newspaper and hide behind it. They do not want to get involved. But there may be a little old lady who will take on the offender, get in his face, and tell him he is behaving badly. As disciplinarians parents of children come in all shapes and sizes. Some simply ignore the offence as though nothing were wrong. Others make consistent efforts to correct misbehavior whenever it happens.

In today's gospel Our Lord Jesus reminds us the spiritual accord of the Church is not man-made but *God given*. Jesus shrewdly puts forward the idea that even among well-meaning church people there will be differences. We are to get used to that fact. The Lord went on to outline a way to protect the God-given harmony of the Church. The model given by Christ shows restraint and moderation. He begins with the least invasive and most face-saving route possible in pursuit of reconciliation and getting things right. But notice He clearly comes down on the side of taking *action*.

The difficulty is that compassion and restraint are often mistaken for weakness or endorsement. In today's gospel the Lord is describing the Christian community. It is a group whose membership is defined by Divine revelation. There are other groups which would define revelation by the inclusiveness of the community. They are free to set different guidelines for membership. These are the "It doesn't matter what you believe" people. But the Church of Jesus Christ is defined by *God's* law, and some behavior is out of bounds according to that law. In the American Midwest you see billboards along highways which quote Almighty God as saying, "Which part of 'Thou shalt not' didn't you understand?" Christians are indeed instructed to be generous in love, forgiveness and tolerance. But at all times we must insist the very name "Christianity" has specific riders attached. If you want something else you must call it by a different name. *This one* is already taken!

The procedure as outlined by Our Lord Jesus is straightforward enough. First, one person brings the offense to the attention of the offender. He does so behind closed doors. Often things can be worked out in private. If the effort is unsuccessful, one

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 10, 2017

+

or two other church members may be brought in. Perhaps these people are able to bring a clear and fresh approach to the problem of finding resolution and reconciliation. If all else fails the matter is not ignored but is to come before the whole church for judgment.

The reason why action is taken goes very far back in Israel's history and mindset. We are reminded of this by the prophet Ezekiel. He gave us some eye-opening words about *our failure as church people* to warn and correct the wicked man. In Hebrew thinking a religious person is a *public person*. The Lord gave the Law to Moses saying, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18) After that no right-thinking Hebrew would ever think it acceptable to hide behind his newspaper when a fellow human being was being victimized by evil.

The Word of God gave that concept to Moses, and inspired Ezekiel. Now God Incarnate built upon the same theme. He told us how members of the Church community are to act. And He promised that when two or three are gathered in His Name He will support them, not only in their efforts at prayer, but also in their attempts to get at the root causes of things. That includes times when action is taken against practices that are contrary to the gospel well-being of the flock.

The great 20th Century Christian apologist C.S. Lewis once wrote the boundary of Christianity is *closer in* than we once thought. Christianity not only has *boundaries* but within those boundaries there is not as much wiggle room to maneuver as we sometimes think or want. In the gospels our Lord often likens the Church to a garden or vineyard. Gardens and vineyards have *borders* beyond which are weeds and thorns. It is all too easy to get out of gospel territory. So much for the "It doesn't matter what you believe" crowd!

There will be differences as long as we are dealing with fallen but redeemed human nature! And instant news media being those painful differences into our living rooms in astonishing short order. But Christ is the Redeemer. Not *was* but *is*! Therefore we owe everything to Him Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. There is a Christian way of resolving differences, and we must pray, with prayers of supplication and thanksgiving, for the teaching and pastoral office of the

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 10, 2017

+

Church, that it will always reflect that same combination of zeal for truth and gentleness of approach that are so characteristic of God's Own Son, Who, after all, is both our Elder Brother and the Head of the Church.