

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 6, 2020

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People respond and react to situations in as many ways as there are personality types. The same glass of water may be seen as half empty or half full. Reactions to misbehavior are not exempt from the variety of human responses. If a passenger on a bus begins to act in some obnoxious manner, many people will simply raise the morning paper and hide behind it. They do not want to get involved. But a little old lady will take on the offender, get in his face, shake her cane, 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 loving but consistent efforts to correct misbehavior whenever it happens.

In today's gospel Our Lord Jesus reminds us the spiritual accord of the Church is *God given* and not man-made. Even among well-meaning church people there will be differences, and we are to get used to that fact. When we defend the faith, it is necessary to protect the God-given harmony of the Church. And the Lord shows us how to do this. He gives a model which shows restraint and moderation. In pursuit of reconciliation and getting things right, Jesus instructs that we begin with the least invasive and most face-saving route possible. But notice the Lord doesn't condone hiding behind a newspaper! God's Own Son comes down clearly on the side of taking *action*.

The difficulty is that compassion and moderation are often mistaken for weakness or endorsement. Adolf Hitler thought Neville Chamberlain weak in 1938. But the same man declared war on Germany in 1939. In today's gospel the Lord is describing the Christian community, a group whose membership is defined by Divine revelation. Not the other way round! There are religious groups, intent on growing the numbers, which invite one and all to pull a chair up to the table and *then* we'll decide what we believe. But *Christ's Church is defined by God's law*, and according to that law some behavior is out of bounds. In the American Midwest you can see billboards along highways which quote Almighty God saying "Which part of '*Thou shalt not*' didn't you understand?" Christians are instructed to be generous in love, forgiveness, and tolerance. But at all times the very name "Christian" has specific riders attached. And if people do not like those parameters they must call their sect by another name.

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As outlined by Our Lord Jesus, the procedure for getting things right is straightforward enough. The first step is: one person brings the offense to the attention of the offender, and does this behind closed doors. Often things can be worked out in private. But if the effort is not successful, one or two other church members may be brought in. These people may be able to bring a clear and fresh approach to finding resolution. But if all efforts fail, the matter is not ignored, but is brought before the whole church for judgement.

Action has to be taken. And the reason goes far back in Israel's history and mindset. You heard from the prophet Ezekiel. He gave us some eye-opening words about *our failure as church people to warn and correct the wicked man*. That is because 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*) And so 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 instruction to Moses, and it inspired Ezekiel. Now, the Word of God Incarnate is built upon the same theme. Jesus told us how members of the Church community are to act. He also promised that when two or three are gathered in His Name He will support them: not only in their prayers, but also in their attempts to get things right. That includes times when action is taken against practices which are contrary to the gospel well-being of the flock.

The Lord often likens His Church to a garden or vineyard. Gardens and vineyards have *borders* beyond which are weeds and thorns. And just as it is easy to get out of the vineyard, it is all too easy to get out of gospel territory. There will always be differences among people as long as we are dealing with fallen human nature. Instant news media bring those differences into our living rooms in astonishing short order! But Christ is *the Redeemer*. We owe *everything* to Him Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We must pray for the teaching office of Christ's Church, that she will always reflect that same combination of zeal for truth and gentleness of approach which are characteristic of God's Own Son. In the family of God He is both our Elder Brother, and Head of the Church.