

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time: September 6, 2020

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

A Gospel Reflection (*Ez. 33:7-9 Rom. 13:8-10 Mt. 18:15-20*)

Accountability. What an interesting concept in today's age. A call to hold one another accountable is a unique ask in this time of rampant misinformation and social media – and, more powerfully, perhaps, in an age in which the divisions between us feel unmovable, unworthy of our feeble attempts to mend them, and only deepened by our sometimes-ego-driven-sometimes-genuine efforts to, as the prophet Ezekiel says, “turn them from their ways.”

Was this what You had in mind then, God?

Maybe this is a catalyst to aim for a deeper form of accountability. So often, today's ‘holding one another accountable’ looks like ad hominem attacks, hasty judgments, and self-protective walls that go up when a more honest – and vulnerable – answer to something may be “I don't know.” But, in the second reading today, St. Paul tells us *Love* is both the goal and the method of accountability: “Love is the fulfillment of the law.”

Which brings us, I suppose, to ask what love is, which can sometimes get rather complicated, but is most often quite simple.

Today, we are asked to consider love in the context of the last line of Matthew's Gospel: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” *Gathering* is a key to actualizing the Love that is both the means and the fulfillment of holding one another accountable. All those other ways we harm each other in the name of accountability (read: Love) get less frequent, less painful, when we start from a place of together-ness.

It's easier to say, “I don't know, can you tell me more?” in a vocal conversation than in a public comment thread. It's easier to understand why someone thinks the way they do when we talk to each other as human beings, as friends, than when we get a two-line synopsis of the *symptom* of deep hurt, rather than a grasp at its origins. Those deeper truths are made possible when we gather.

Yet, need I state the obvious – gathering today is hard, too. And gathering is even more necessary at a time of such pain in our communities, our country, our world.

As I write this, I am on day 178 of reporting how many people have contracted and lost their lives to COVID-19 for my job in DC. One hundred seventy-eight days since the first reported cases here. It has been my goal throughout this response to keep these numbers from becoming – just that – numbers.

Each of the 607 DC residents who have lost their lives to this virus is a living soul, whose earthly time was full of stories, relationships, joys, hardships. I must never grow numb to that. Yet, allowing myself to think about it for more than a minute can lead to deep, overwhelming grief. When, God, will the numbers go down, and stay down? Can You at least show us the light at the end of the tunnel?

...silence.

One of my favorite lines of music is:

Hurting, hurting

Take courage, my love

Worth it, it is worth it

Take this pain and mourn

We have to mourn. When my grandmother died while I was thousands of miles away in Zambia and unable to return home, a dear mentor reminded me that missing the comfort and closure offered via the Catholic rituals around death does make it harder – but I can write my own. “You were baptized ‘priest, prophet, and king’ you know — time to be your own priest, Sweetheart.”

And I did. Creating my own rituals to honor my grandma’s legacy, despite being unable to gather with my family and communities, remain some of the most meaningful grieving experiences I have had.

I truly believe that acknowledging the pain of our world right now, and really, truly grieving what we must, is fundamental to our ability to move forward with optimism and hope. Until we can gather with one another in person, that might mean reconnecting with our Baptismal calls in new and creative ways.

Take courage, my love

Worth it, it is worth it

And, of course, we continue to gather as a St. Vincent’s community, whether at Sunday Mass, at a weekly educational event, or simply through prayer and spirit. We are still gathered. We are still two or more. We are still in the presence of God. We are still in the presence of Love.

So, when I am in the presence of that Love, strengthened by those gathered, I am my best self. I can practice a way of accountability that is quicker to engage without judgment, to admit when I don't know and then learn more, to thank someone for journeying with me, to accompany someone on their own journey of learning more about a political or social issue. I think that is the accountability Ezekiel, St. Paul, and Matthew – the accountability our God of Many Names – call us to today.

And, for what it's worth, I like to think God's promise to show up where two or more are gathered applies to Zoom, too.

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