

**Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – September 10, 2017**  
**Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Parochial Administrator**

Every week, it seems, we hear of another case where the cell phone or other device of a Hollywood starlet has been hacked and, as a result, some less than wholesome pictures were published on the internet. Apparently, these photos are always out there – just hanging out in the cloud – when some enterprising person makes it his or her purpose to figure out how to pierce that cloud. Hollywood is always outraged at these horrible breaches of privacy. They frequently demand – and sometimes get – multiple criminal investigations. Indeed, I think that you could steal the nuclear codes and have fewer people up in arms than with this sort of computer espionage. “How can any of us protect ourselves?” the handwringers in the media are asking. Now you and I might quickly be able to figure out that if we don’t want to see pictures of ourselves undressed splashed all over the internet, one way of preventing it would be never to take such pictures in the first place. But that kind of restraint would take more brain power – and more moral fiber – than the average inhabitant of Hollywood will ever possess. So as a society we must continue to fight electronic battles over what should be public and what should be private.

That’s how Jesus begins his conversation with the disciples in today’s gospel. One suspects that there has been some controversy within the community and the disciples have asked Jesus how they should handle it. Jesus tells them a dispute should be settled privately – if at all possible. Now that’s a completely foreign concept in this internet/reality TV age – when people broadcast the most mundane, the most private, the most embarrassing details of their lives – but privacy is Jesus’ starting point. If someone sins against you – talk it over with them privately. If it is resolved, then you have won them over and no one else has to know. Note how different that is from our first inclination – when someone hurts us, offends us, sins against us, our first inclination is to shout if from the rafters, to let everyone know what a scoundrel the offender is. Jesus tells us not to. Why? Doesn’t that scoundrel deserve the shame and humiliation? Well, perhaps. But maybe, just maybe it is you who are wrong. In the midst of our righteous indignation, maybe the private conversation will reveal that we have misinterpreted the situation. Instead of winning over our brother, it could be that our brother will win us over. By taking care of the situation privately, no one else needs to know about it. We’ve resolved things in an adult way – without exposing anyone to shame – either for the wrong that they committed or for our misinterpretation of the situation.

If that doesn’t work, Jesus says – bring in one or two more people. Maybe a mediator will help to clarify the situation. And if it is still unresolved, bring it to the community of believers – the church as Matthew calls it, somewhat anachronistically. As people committed to prayer, discerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church should be the perfect example of the watchmen of the Lord described in our

first reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel. It should, ultimately, be the Church who proclaims the divine Word, who helps to guide the path of the righteous and dissuade the wicked from their way. But Jesus recognizes that even the Church may not be persuasive, that the sinner may not choose to repent. In this case, he tells his disciples, treat them as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.

Here's where we have to do a little research. How would the disciples of Jesus have treated Gentiles and tax collectors? Would they have stoned them, beheaded them, crucified them? Confronted with a Gentile or a tax collector, would they have argued with them, taken them to the Roman law courts? No, in Jesus' time, the disciples would have ignored them, looked the other way, ceased welcoming them into their homes. They would have avoided them, but they would have never treated them with violence or disrespect. When we are wronged, our first inclination may be to lash out with violence. Certainly, we are inclined to speak out, to let everyone know that we have been hurt. Jesus' advice, on the other hand, is to let as few people know as possible and – once the offender has refused to listen even to the Church – to keep one's distance from them, to keep silent. Ultimately, of course, Jesus invites us to forgive – but that's the subject of another gospel. Today, he asks only that we draw close to the church, to the community of faith and humbly listen to his Word. And we are to remain open to reconciliation, to healing.

Where's that in the gospel, you may ask? Well, right there in the next sentence. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Binding and loosing – not just binding. When someone sins against us we are wounded. Naturally we cover a wound, we bind it up to keep it from getting infected and to allow it to heal. But when the healing has taken place, we remove the bandage, we loosen the binding. When someone sins against us – we must be open to healing, open to reconciliation, open to binding the wound and eventually to loosening the binding. And if it is a wound that is small, that is discreet, that is capable of being healed between the wounded and the one who inflicted the wound – well, then the danger of infection is greatly diminished. The more we open a wound, however, to show it around, to seek advice or sympathy – the more we risk infection, and the tougher the healing process will be. That's why Jesus recommended privacy – to promote healing. But we now live in a society where privacy has been largely abandoned – where everything is posted on the internet and where anything posted on the internet is there forever. Is it any wonder why healing and reconciliation are so rare these days? Is it any wonder why our political leaders find compromise so difficult? Jesus promised that where two or three are gathered together in his name, he would be in the midst of them. Maybe it's time that we stopped gathering in our own name, with our own agenda. Maybe it is time that we stopped hiding behind our screen name or our online profile and actually started gathering in Christ's name. It is then, I suggest, that we will find him in our midst.