

23rd Sunday of the Year A September 4th, 2011 – Fr. Gerald Haemmerle

Five million copies of the novel The Help have been sold over the past two years, and now it is one of the most popular movies in the area. I know many of you are familiar with it. It is about a young white woman fresh from college who wants to be a writer. She sees things in her home town of Jackson, Mississippi differently now, she is aware of the racism that was so present in the 1960's. And so she begins to talk with the African-American maids who work in so many of the homes in that city. She begins to see things through their eyes, and it is not a pretty picture. Often the maids are treated unjustly, certainly as second class citizens. The book is written and published, to the great consternation of many of those white women. The writer finds herself very unwelcomed in that city.

Our first reading is from Ezekiel, the prophet. It began, "I have appointed you watchman to the house of Israel." All prophets were watchman to warn the people, and none of them were appreciated. People do not want to hear criticism, and that makes it very difficult to offer criticism to others, to point out their faults.

In our gospel today Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault." One of the things that I struggle with each year are evaluations of staff. We have a wonderful staff here, and there is so much positive to point out to them. But if there is one area where there could be some improvement, and you point that out, that seems to color the entire evaluation in some cases. Aren't we all like that, we hate criticism, and because of that we find it difficult to offer even constructive criticism to another.

Then Jesus said, "If he does not listen, take several with you to offer that criticism." You have all heard of an intervention. Usually they are used when a loved one is having an addiction problem, affecting their home life or their work life. People who care for the individual confront the person with the problem. Usually there is resentment and anger, which is why we hate to do it. But if the person does seek help, and is helped, eventually he comes to appreciate the concern that was shown to them.

Recently we celebrated the feast of St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine. Several hundred people came to mass that Saturday morning, to pray for a loved one who no longer practices the Catholic faith. I pointed out that she did not continually nag him, but rather prayed for him and gave him a wonderful example. But I bet she occasionally pointed out to him his faults, and her hope that he would give up his sinful ways, and return to the true faith. Augustine finally accepted her criticism.

In our gospel today Jesus seems to be suggesting to us that fraternal correction is part of our duty as a Christian. Its all in how we do it. We need to have courage to do it, and we need to do it out of love, with compassion and patience, with gentleness and humility. We need to have tact. But at times we simply need to do it, with our children, with our students, with family and friends, always out of love and with love. That is how a good community is built.

The gospel ends with Jesus saying, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." There are many of us gathered here today, and Jesus is in our midst. We pray to him that we might have the courage and the love and tact to correct and support one another.