

St Pius-St Anthony 23rd Sunday Ordinary Time Year A

Happy Labor Day! I ran across a statistic the other day that mentioned that the most productive workers are those with a sense of humor, those able to laugh at themselves! So, here are my two favorite brief, preachable work jokes, "I bet you heard of the guy who came home from work so upset and muttering to his wife, "I will never work for that guy again!" She said, "What did you all have words again, what did he say to you?" He told me I was fired! Or how about this one I love better, "An HR Manager had to have a difficult conversation with a truant & absentee worker and it went like this: The HR man said to him, "We need to talk, because I understand 'You are missing work, a lot'. And the man snapped back cutely, "I wouldn't say I miss it." Or the time Pope John XXIII was greeting a group of visitors to the Vatican and one of them asked, "This place is so big. How many people work here?" And Pope John 23rd replied, "Oh, about half of them."

But really, speaking of work and labor how about the 'labor of love' we hear about in the gospel--The work of forgiveness. We are midway through a three week cycle of teaching from Jesus about the life-giving peace that forgiveness brings to us. So here we go. Today we hear Jesus' 4 -ten plan of resolving conflict and mediating grievances. He teaches how we are to responsibly forgive others to maintain good relationship to them.

When I was a kid, I sure heard this a time or two (and bet that everyone has heard this one time or another by a parent, grandparent or maybe teacher/guardian who gets in the tough love position of having to be FIRM and discipline a child for their own good). They say, "***This hurts me more than it hurts you***". As kids, don't we want to say, "Oh yeah, then hand me that switch" or "you pick up all these marbles thrown all over the room, while I go back to play." A version of this 'tough love' from another culture, was a friend of mine in high school who was telling me that when he was growing up in south Korea, whenever he got in trouble at school, his mother at home later got a tree stick whip and made him whip her on her calves. she told him, "This is what you do to me when the schoolmaster points you out for misbehavior." He told me after it, he didn't do that anymore.

Well, Jesus gives us a four step forgiveness plan, I think he is telling us that withholding forgiveness from someone 'hurts us more than it hurts them'. His method is to first go to the person. If it doesn't work, then take a couple mutual friends to work it out. Still doesn't work, then ask the church's help and prayer. If still not effective at healing divide, then treat them as a tax collector. Even the simple fact that he outlines four steps, tells me this whole work of getting over and healing offenses is serious and

important for everyone involved. He could have just said, “Go try to talk to them.....failing that, give it up...” But No, Jesus says, “Go back at it this way and that way, and in the end go back again to the drawing board to come up with an even more creative and novel way to break through the offense and restore fellowship bonds. We might ask, “Why try so hard?” Jesus gives the motive for working so hard at ‘reconciliation’ in Matt 18:15, when he says after having a one on one with the person, “If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.” The goal is keeping relationship with brother or sister. Again, I think Jesus is saying that when we let ‘hurt and offenses wedge between us and (and definitely if we nurse the hurt and hold grudges), “It hurts us more than it hurts them.” Because isn’t a held grudge just that: Our way of saying in a retributive way, “Look at what you did bad”, as if we keep picking at a scab to make it bleed all over again keeping it sore, and saying, “you did this...” Don’t we want healing? Then let that wound heal. Be careful and wise not to let it happen again, but then heal from it and move forward.

I do want to emphasize that the fourth step is not what we may think it is at first. Sometimes we hear Jesus say, “Treat them as you would a tax collector or Gentile” and we hear, “okay, you tried, now give it back to them” as if we’re then justified in hating them or worse yet, hurting them back for what they did to us. I think that he even offers FOUR attempts, says a lot. It means, ‘Don’t give up on them’ and that we should be better. I think the key to engaging in this healing and forgiveness work, is that anything we do, not be motivated by any selfish gain or satisfaction of our pleasures. Any attempt at confronting the offense, must be as primarily motivated by the sentiment that “I am doing this for you (or at least for others), insofar as I am bringing this offense of yours up to you (or to you with others or asking the church to help with this) so that you may not continue hurting more others. Also, to help them see that their lack of feeling for others holds them back from deeper more rewarding relationship to others, too. If you hurt me and think nothing of it or refuse to acknowledge my response, then likely you’ll continue and hurt other people too. So our motivation in doing anything like this confronting an offense and wrong at all must be that your offense against me, hurt you also. So, yes, it may be easiest thing to do, to just ignore you and walk off leaving you in your hardened self-but that could be SPITE in me-not good, and that creates hardness in my heart against you--there it is again-- hurting me more than you). So, even if you have no feeling for me, then may my bringing it to you in a one on one, help you to please not do that to anyone else. Realize, too, that one day you will inevitably be

on the receiving end of what you did to me, so then what? Well, let me show you how a good Christian reacts to 'offenses' and sins against them. And that is why Jesus outlines this four step method of keeping in relationship to others and working (yes, it is work) out hurts and offenses among brothers and sisters. And we are not done; next week we will hear more about this Christian work of forgiving and healing others. I close with this that one word from the reading that jumps out at me is that four times the word listen is used. I guess Jesus is saying we may nip a lot of hurt in the bud and prevent the further spread of offenses, if we only listened more. Perhaps our listening more, is what may make us follower of Jesus better mediators, peacemakers and healers of hurt among people.