

## HOMILY

### The Twenty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time

September 6-7, 2008

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Something tragic has happened in our land. That something has to do with human relationships. We're less trusting, more suspicious, fearful of opening ourselves to others. Some of us have truly no close friends. We're isolated and alone. We wall ourselves into gated communities and, worse yet, we don't even know the other people behind those walls, much less people outside.

Therapist Will Miller wrote a book which he titled "Refrigerator Rights." He says we need people around us who have what he calls "refrigerator rights." This is someone who can come into our home and feel comfortable going to our refrigerator to make a sandwich without our permission. Miller argues that too many Americans suffer mentally and emotionally because they have too few of these kinds of close relationships.

He's right. Studies show that our society is suffering from our lack of involvement with one another. Not only is our society suffering, so are we as individuals.

Sometime back, a team headed by a Harvard social scientist tracked the lives of 7,000 people over nine years. Here's what the team found out: People with the fewest personal relationships were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections. ***Three times!*** In fact, people with bad health habits such as smoking, poor eating habits or alcohol use, but who had strong social ties, lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits but who were isolated. In other words, it is better to eat Twinkies with friends than to eat broccoli alone. If you belong to no groups but decide to join one, you can cut your risk of dying over the next year in half. In the words of the old Barbara Streisand song:

*"People - people who need people,  
Are the luckiest people in the world..."*

Relationships are important. We need to believe that or we cannot appreciate Jesus' words for today. Relationships matter. In fact, the only thing that really matters in life is relationships. When life is over, everything we have in this world will disappear and decay. Only one thing will remain – relationships. We need our relationships to be strong and we want them to last. Now listen to Jesus' words: *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone”*

*“If your brother sings against you....”* Now this doesn't mean your brother in a literal sense, though it could. How many of us have seen a family relationship grow strained or even break? My guess is that there is someone in this room who hasn't spoken to at least one member of their family in several years. Someone said something catty; someone took a prized possession from mom's estate without asking; someone borrowed money and never paid it back. The reasons are many and varied, but we all know families where relationships have been splintered and torn.

But Jesus isn't just talking about our sisters and brothers by blood. I believe that “brother” is anyone with whom we have a strong personal relationship. In other words, if someone you care about hurts you, make an attempt to heal the relationship as quickly as possible even if you are not at fault. If you think this is an easy teaching by Our Lord, you have never had anyone hurt you. Some of us have been there, haven't we? After a while, it may become a matter of pride.

Gilbert and Sullivan are two of the great names of musical theater. Their operettas have thrilled millions. But for years they were estranged from each other. They still collaborated—Gilbert would send the lyrics of the operetta they were working on by mail to Sullivan and he would send the music back by mail. But when they had an opening night, they would stand at opposite ends of the stage and bow facing forward so that they would not ever need to look at each other. The problem was that they had a falling out over the purchase of a new carpet in one of their theatres and never settled their grudge.

It happens. The sad thing is that the closer the relationship, often the more intense the anger, the resentment, the bitterness. And it is very, very difficult to take the first step. Yet, Jesus tells us that is what we must do. It doesn't really matter who is at fault. All that matters is the relationship.

But Jesus is no dreamer. Not every relationship can be healed. You may have a friend who brings out the worst in you, who tears you down, who makes you question your essential self-worth. There are some relationships that should be severed. There are parents who face a dilemma with a son or daughter who's hooked on drugs, who's stealing, who's responded to their every effort to heal the relationship by taking advantage of them. The only way they can possibly force that person to face the consequences of their actions is to apply tough love. To say to that person, we love you but you cannot come back into this home until you are serious about kicking your habit. It tears your heart out; but there comes a time when you must face reality. Some relationships cannot be healed unless the other person makes some changes. We love Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son, but the Prodigal Son has to want to come home.

In closing, let us again hear the words of Jesus:

***“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.”***