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The First Sunday of Lent (C)

Says Moses to the people of Israel: "The priest shall receive the basket from you and shall set it in front of the altar of the LORD, your God" (Deuteronomy 26:4). As we hear these words we recall the words of Jesus: "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).

Saint Jerome notes that Jesus "did not say, 'If you have anything against your brother' but 'If your brother has anything against you,' so that a greater need for reconciliation is imposed on you."¹ We must, then, do all that we can to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Notice here, if you will, that Jesus does not say to be reconciled *after* we make our offering, but *before* we offer the sacrifice.² Whenever we come to the Holy Mass, then, we should first strive to be reconciled with those who have grudges and hurt feelings toward us, otherwise our offering may be in vain and this is no small matter.

¹ Saint Jerome, CCL 77:28.

² Saint John Chrysostom, PG 57:250.

Do not counter with "He offended me; I didn't offend him. He ought to square up with me, and not I with him." If for the sake of your salvation the Lord orders you to make friends, though you are the one who has been more offended, you must apologize, that you may have double credit: first, because you have been offended and, second, because you were the first to apologize. For if you have offended someone and then ask pardon of him, the Lord will forgive you for your offense because you were the first to ask pardon. You will have no reward, however, if you are the guilty person and have asked pardon. But if one has done wrong by you and you are the first to apologize, you will have a great reward. Hurry therefore to be the first one to make friends. Otherwise, if you should delay, he may be the first to apologize and may snatch from your hands the reward of love.³

We ought to compete with each other not for place of rank or honor, not to outdo each other in athletic contests or the pursuit of money, but to outdo each other in love. The love we see in each other should spur us on to love all the more! How can we seek to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters? How can we grow in this love?

³ Anonymous, *Incomplete Work on Matthew*, Homily 11.

On Ash Wednesday I spoke briefly about keeping custody of the senses as a way to grow in love. We must keep custody of the eyes lest we see something that leads us to sin. We must keep custody of the ears lest we hear something that leads us to sin. We must keep custody of the mouth lest we lead others to sin. The well-known phrase, "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" is quite poignant, even today. Those monkeys know what they are doing.

Keeping custody of the tongue is, perhaps, the most difficult of the senses to control, but at the same time it is the one that does the most harm. When we are tempted to gossip about someone or some situation - as each of us is - we would do well to remember the words of Jesus: "What comes out of a person, that is what defiles" (Mark 7:20).

Very often it happens that our brother has something against us not so much because of what we have done, but because of what we have said. If we love with the love of Christ Jesus - as indeed we are called to do - we should desire to remove all possible reasons for our brothers and sisters to hold anything against us, either in act or speech.

We all know the childhood line: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Nothing could be farther from the truth, and the evil of gossip is perhaps the

most damaging and hurtful of all words. Let me illustrate my point.

Shortly after I arrived at this parish twenty months ago, a friend told me a rumor was circulating concerning my parents. Apparently someone heard that my parents are both deceased having died when I was a young boy, but apparently the circumstances concerning their deaths were not being told. Instead, someone decided that my parents must have died in a car accident - what other reason could there be? - and began telling others this as fact, or at least it was heard as fact.

When this gossip was first brought to my attention I was very offended, angry and deeply hurt. Not only did this gossip demonstrate a clear lack of love, but it also demonstrated a lack of respect because not one person spreading this gossip had the decency to inquire about my parents. They did not die in a car accident. My father died of alcoholism twenty-one years last week ago and my mother died of a brain tumor nineteen years ago last month.

The evil of gossip is insidious and immensely poisonous to the soul. You know as well as I do how prevalent it is in this community and it is not simply because Effingham "is a small town". Gossip has no place in the Christian life because it violates love and spreads lies. Gossip betrays a certain

arrogance and pride of both the one who speaks and the one who listens to it. Gossip encompasses a great many sins.

Gossip must stop and in order for it to stop each of us must first recognize that we all gossip, although some of us more frequently than others. With this in mind, I suggest three ways to know if one is a gossip:

1. If you have ever begun a sentence saying, "I'm not a gossip but..." you are indeed a gossip. If you were not one there would be no reason to preface your sentence.
2. If you find that you talk about other people more than your family and dear friends, you are a gossip.
3. If you talk with people about things that have nothing to do with either of you, you are a gossip.

If we do not know the facts we should not speculate because someone will think we are speaking the facts. Before we open our mouths, we ought to ask this question: "Will what I am about to say be helpful in the journey to heaven?" If it will, good, say it. If not, keep your mouth closed and your brother will not have anything to hold against you and you will not have to be reconciled to him.

Why do we gossip and talk about each other in such ways? Why do we hold our grudges so tightly and close to us? Why do we so enjoy focusing on the faults of others and shy away from examining our own faults?

None of us wakes up in the morning thinking, "Who's life can I make miserable today? What can I say to so-and-so to make her mad today?" Each of us wakes up with the desire to do good, but because of sin we fall short of our goals and we fail to love as we should. Each of us does; anyone who says otherwise is a liar.

Rather than condemning each other and spreading such gossip, rumors and lies, we ought to help each other follow after Jesus Christ. Love should flow out of our lips, not hate and deceit. Let us, then, be reconciled with each other this Lenten season so that coming before the Lord, we can offer the gift of our lives in faith and love and "bow down in his presence" (Deuteronomy 26:10). Amen.