

My wife has an e-commerce business where she sells church technology equipment to churches in the United States and elsewhere in the world. Sometimes when I happen to pick up the business line, a pastor at the end of the line says to me, "Is Sister Jeanne there?" I am a little taken back by the question, since I am a bit more reserved when I talk to someone for the first time. But I immediately think, that this must be a Baptist, who considers Jeanne a sister in the faith. If I would call you Brother Bob, or Sister Sally, how would you take that? Would you view it as an outdated comment, a bit tacky way of addressing you? In the days of Jesus, when Jesus called someone a brother or sister, it was said to denote a closeness - a special bond - unlike any other in the world. When someone called you a brother or sister, it was a loving and caring remark. A brother or sister is someone who shares your faith in Jesus as Savior.

Jesus Christ wants us to have a close and connected bond with those of us who are members of Open Bible Lutheran church. That's why He mentions the word "brother" in our lesson for today. I know that our society says that there are two topics you should never talk about with friends, "Religion and Politics". But Jesus would disagree with that statement. Jesus would say that amongst Christian brothers and sisters, you should be able to talk about religion, with each side being willing to listen to what the other brother or sister has to say. And when one brother or sister is out of line, the other brother or sister needs to be courageous enough to confront and correct them. So today, let's take a look at a responsibility we have to those who sit in the pews around us. "You are indeed Your Brother's Keeper!"

Whenever a new member joins our church, I ask you the question - Do you agree to minister to this fellow member with your concern, support, prayers and friendship? If so, answer: YES, IN THE BOND OF CHRISTIAN LOVE. This fellowship that God wants for us to have as Christians is supposed to be a stronger bond than Elmer's or super glue. It is supposed to mean that we can talk "Jesus" together. It is supposed to mean that we look out after one another. It is also supposed to mean that we can be lovingly honest with one another without parting company. Proverbs 24:26 An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.

It is in the context of the spiritual "family" that Jesus introduces the concept watching one another's back. "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. The word for "sin" is *amartia* - which means to "miss the mark." In some way, it would have to be something that is clearly against God's Word and that has definitely caused you - a fellow Christian - grief - by witnessing your friend doing it. And what you need to remember is that this is a deliberate sin. What that means is that the brother or sister continues to do the same sin again and again, and has no desire to forsake that sin, and repent. When this happens, God tells fellow Christians to "show him his fault." The Greek word for "show" is *elegxw*. It means, 1) to convict, refute. By conviction it means to bring to the light, to expose.

This whole concept is almost completely foreign to what people think of when it comes to "church" today. Church, according to most Americans, is kind of like an individual membership at a health club. You go there to get fit, you may have your own personal trainer, or you may just exercise on your own. You may have a few friends there, maybe not. Nonetheless, you don't feel the need to really be that connected with anyone else who goes there. Most would just as soon put on headphones and mind their

own business. That's how many view "church" as today - a bunch of individuals who come to individually be fed and then leave. No more, no less. It's a part of America's rugged individualism that likes to rely on no one - hates telemarketers, door to door salesmen, and anyone else that invades their personal privacy. Don't judge me. Don't worry about me. Don't think about me. Just leave me alone, and I'll leave you alone.

This is NOT God's concept of a church. God's concept is of a close knit family, that loves and cares for each other. If I see my daughter walking toward an unleashed Rotweiler, that is growling, and preparing to charge her, you'd better believe I will jump in, put my life on the line to protect her from danger. It's the same way in the church. If one of my brothers or sisters is getting enslaved in a sin, I have to step in. When a deliberate sin goes on in someone's active lifestyle and is not repented of, it leads to unbelief and hell. You have to warn them.

You might remember when John Walker - an American - was caught behind enemy lines fighting with the Taliban. His title as "American" did him no good in that situation. His actions showed him to be an enemy combatant. Member of a church or not - if you find yourself fighting in Satan's camp and doing his will willingly, it won't matter if you're a "member of a "Lutheran," "Baptist," or "Catholic" church, you're on the road to hell. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. How could any of us just allow a fellow Christian to fall into regular drunkenness, slander, or any of these things without a fight or so much as a rebuke?

God's kind of love calls us to even get more involved than just a personal rebuke, though. Often times it happens that the brother or sister in Christ doesn't see the sin that is being committed, or selfishly wants to continue in it. So he or she gets angry and starts making counter accusations. The brother or sister says that you are unloving, uncaring, hypocritical, you name it. Then Jesus proceeds, if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' In AA they might call this a "confrontation." Or "Intervention." By bringing along mature Christians it establishes the fact that one Christian isn't simply holding a grudge against another. It can also help to establish the fact that an actual sin is being committed and this isn't just a matter of false judgment. When one or two other respected Christians tell their brother or sister that the deliberate sin they are committing is hurting their Savior and themselves, they may indeed repent and turn from that behavior. If that be the case, you rejoice, and do not proceed with any further follow-up.

Unfortunately, many times the two or three witnesses are not listened to. That's when it has to go a step further. Jesus said, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church;" This sounds like slander to some. Jesus tells us to air out the dirty laundry of a fellow member for everyone to see. Tell it to the church! Why? Wouldn't that be embarrassing? Yes. If the whole church agrees that the behavior is sinful, however, it gives opportunity for an overwhelming testimony against the one lone member that his or her behavior is wrong. It may awaken them. They may indeed repent.

However, when this is not listened to, then the final step is to be taken. "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 18 "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever

you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” This is what is commonly called excommunication. It is not “kicking someone out of the church.” It is telling someone that he or she has succumbed to Satan’s temptation, and is no longer a child of God. It is telling someone that he or she is on the highway to hell. It is the last act of Christian love. The excommunication is just a public declaration of how God looks at the person. When you tell someone that their sins are bound in heaven, it means that God will not forget their sins on Judgment Day. There’s no stronger statement you can make. It is supposed to jar the person - wake him or her up - realize the pathway they are headed on, so that they can be saved.

Back in the 1970’s I believe it was - Barbara Walters did an interview with Betty Ford around Christmas time. As the interview waned on, it didn’t take long to realize that Mrs. Ford was seriously intoxicated. If I remember correctly, nobody did anything about it at the time. Instead, they just had to scrap the interview and do something else. It was like everyone knew she had a drinking problem, but everybody just tried to ignore it and shove it under the rug. I can bet almost every one of us knows someone who is caught up in a sin that nobody has done anything about, but everybody knows. Instead of covering up the truth, church discipline is meant to expose the truth and act on it. That’s what the Corinthians ended up having to do with a man who decided to have sexual relations with his father’s wife. They had to publicly let this man know that he was acting like a heathen and that he was in fact a heathen, as his actions betrayed. What happened in the end? The man repented! He stopped what he was doing! They welcomed him back and forgave him. From that point on, he was no longer a member by name only. He was a member in heart and actions. Is that so wrong? Is that really unloving? No.

This idea of brotherhood is the principle on which the Christian Church is founded. We have all fallen in our responsibilities as brothers and sisters in the faith. We’ve selfishly sat on the side and allowed fellow believers to continue in sin and go on to unbelief when we could have made an effort to do more. We’ve fallen flat on our faces. In fear, we have kept our mouths shut. Yet Jesus didn’t leave us to wallow in the mud. He became our Brother, by taking on our flesh. He confronted us with our sin, of failing to confront our brother or sister in their sin. But then He even went a step further. Not only did He become our brother, but He even went so far as to become our SIN – taking on our sins of cowardness, and failing to speak up for God God on the cross. He took on God’s wrath for our sins, as our Brother and won the battle. He left our sins in the grave. With a gift of His Supper He gave us a way to stay strong in the faith. He picked us up - out of Satan’s clutches - and lifted us into heaven itself. This is what our Brother has done for us. Why? Because He wanted to save us. He didn’t want to leave us alone. He said, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” He gave us each other to be brothers and sisters to one another. This is the core of Christianity - Jesus is our Brother and made us brothers and sisters in Him.

Sometimes family can cause you lots of trouble. They’ll press the limits. They’ll test your love. When it comes to spiritual family, the same rings true. It may be easier to just look the other way, and say its none of my business, but it is my business. You are your brother’s keeper. May we all take this responsibility seriously, and help to restore our fallen brothers! Amen.