

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 6, 2026

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gn 4:9) Cain’s response to the Lord’s query of the eldest son of Adam and Eve, regarding his younger brother, Abel, is a question that is asked, in one form or another, throughout scripture. It’s a question that’s begging for an answer in today’s readings.

In today’s first reading, the prophet Ezekiel is speaking as the Lord’s mouthpiece to the people of Israel who are in exile after the Babylonians systematically destroyed Jerusalem and razed Solomon’s Temple in the early 6th century BC. Ezekiel gives the people of Israel hope for the future: Hope that the Lord—the just shepherd—will restore the people of Israel to prosperity in the land of Canaan, if they accept personal responsibility for their actions, mend their ways and return to the Lord.

While this passage describes Ezekiel’s specific divine appointment—as a “watchman”—to warn the nation of Israel to change from its evil ways, it introduces us to the theme of today’s readings: That each of us has the moral duty to look out for the spiritual, as well as the material, well-being of our neighbor. When we observe others in sin, if we don’t speak out to attempt to dissuade them from their sinful ways, then God through his prophet Ezekiel warns us that we are complicit in the sin of the other and will also be subject to God’s judgment. How we go about this duty to turn others away from sin is the rest of the story, detailed by Jesus in the Gospel, and St. Paul in his letter to the Romans.

If another person sins against you or you observe another committing sin, you can turn a blind eye of indifference and just ignore the transgression, or you can try to publicly humiliate them by yelling at them (and make somewhat of a fool of yourself in the process), you can gossip about them behind their back (which also places you in a state of sin) or you can even beat them over the head with a Bible (either figuratively or literally)...Nah; not really! But Jesus, in the gospel, has a more excellent way: A step-by-step guide for resolving conflicts and handling unrepentant sin or conflict within a community of believers, with the ultimate goal being reconciliation and restoration rather than punishment.

First, privately approach the transgressor, then, if they are still unrepentant, bring “one or two [others] along with you, so that every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.” If still unresolved, Jesus commands us to bring the matter before the Church to which Jesus gave the divine ultimate authority to govern, correct, and resolve conflicts within the Christian community.

While Jesus doesn’t want us to be busybodies and pry into other’s lives, he is calling us to care for one another; not only caring for the material needs of others, but their spiritual needs, as well.

And finally, as commanded by the Lord, throughout the entire process of addressing one who has sinned or with whom we have a conflict, we need to heed the words of St. Paul in the second reading. Paul tells us that we owe nothing to anyone except our love, which is the summation of all the commandments. So, when in our encounter with someone who has transgressed against us, we need to be mindful that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself... [for] love is the fulfillment of the law.”

Let us also remember that elsewhere as recorded in the Gospels, Jesus taught us how to pray with the prayer we know as the “Our Father,” in which we petition the Father to forgive our sins “as we forgive those who [sin] against us...” (Mt 6:9-13)

In summary, true Christian love requires courage, humility and a desire to win back our brother or sister. So, in answer to Cain’s question with which I opened: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The Lord’s answer to all of us is: “Yes; yes you are, with love!”