

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR A)

September 6, 2020

Ezekiel 33:7–9 • Romans 13:8–10 • Matthew 18:15–20

I.

I saw an interesting science fiction movie this week called “Magellan” (2017).

In the movie, signs of extraterrestrial life have been detected in the solar system: regular, artificial signals are being emitted from Titan, a moon of Saturn; from Triton, a moon of Neptune; and from the dwarf planet Eris.

NASA dispatches Commander Roger Nelson on a five-year mission to investigate these phenomena.

Commander Nelson eagerly accepts the mission with the support of his wife.

But during the course of the mission, his relationship with his wife becomes strained: Nelson lies in “stasis,” meaning hibernation, for long periods; there is a delay in transmitting messages between them because of the distance; and she suffers an emotional breakdown, and then appears to rebound.

Commander Nelson soldiers on, committed to his mission.

Upon finding the third transmitter, he collects a substance containing DNA.

He has discovered extraterrestrial life.

It’s time to return to Earth.

But repeatedly disobeying orders, Commander Nelson experiments with the transmitters.

At one point, Nelson discovers that, together, the three transmitters are relaying a signal from deep in the Oort Cloud, the deepest region of the solar system.

At the movie's climax,
he decides to leave behind his wife and everything else on earth,
in order to enter "stasis" on a journey to the Oort Cloud

He sends a message to his wife in which he acknowledges the difficulty
of the past five years, and he apologizes for having been absent.

Then he says,

"But I need to move forward.
It's hard to explain, but they're calling me and I have to answer. ...
The answer is somewhere in the Oort Cloud, and that's where I'm headed,
following my own path."

Commander Nelson acknowledges his selfishness in asking so much of her,
and then concludes:

"I release you from any obligation you have toward me whatsoever,
so that you can lead your life as you see fit."

II.

I find sci-fi movies interesting because they are anthropological meditations—
explorations of what it means to be human.

With respect to the movie "Magellan,"
I felt that, as a viewer,
I was being asked to evaluate whether Nelson's decision was human or not,
his decision to choose exploration over his marriage.

On the one hand, humans have an urge and drive to explore,
and in that way to better understand what it means to be human.

But the way he treats his wife—abandoning her—is de-humanizing.

Does he really have the moral authority to unilaterally end the marriage,
and "release" her from all obligations to him?

And the way in which he does it—remotely—adds to the sense of alienation.

How can we be human if we don't care for the most important people in our lives?

III.

That consideration takes us to today's Gospel,
which is very much about relationships,
and the reality of broken relationships.

In this text, and in the Gospel we will hear next Sunday,
Jesus teaches us about reconciliation.

The stories form a single unit:
today's teaching is about confronting wrongdoing;
next Sunday's Gospel is about forgiveness.

“If your brother sins against you,
go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.”

We often avoid this awkward and difficult, though necessary,
step of confrontation.

That makes it harder for us to forgive because the person may not be aware of his
or her fault, and we may not have expressed our pain and frustration.

Instead, like Commander Nelson, we try to go about things from afar.

Instead of speaking directly to someone,
we talk about that person to others.

This happens in marriages, families, friendships, workplaces, and, yes, parishes.

According to the Gospel,
other people are to be involved only when that initial, direct,
and personal encounter yields no result.

“If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.
If he does not listen,
take one or two others along with you...
If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church.”

In this process of confrontation, prudence is the key.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) called prudence, meaning reasoned judgment, the “charioteer of the virtues.”

Prudence determines how to apply Jesus’ teaching to concrete circumstances.

Sometimes it’s prudent to “cool off” so that the initial anger can dissipate.

But if we wait too long, that anger will harden into resentment.

We must also consider whether we have the sufficient emotional strength to have a difficult conversation with someone, without being wounded again.

Then it’s important to think about what we will say.

Next, it’s important to find the right time and place for a conversation, and to speak honestly and charitably with someone, explaining what he or she did, and what effect it had on us.

Then we need to let go, because the other person needs time to come to grips with things.

We can’t control the other person’s reaction, but we will have the peace of knowing that we did what God asked of us.

IV.

Commander Nelson says in the movie, “They’re calling and I need to answer.”

There is also a need, in the Christian life, to answer Christ’s call, to live his teaching as best we can.

We find our true humanity in Jesus Christ, because he is the perfect man, and he unites us to God, our maker.

Reconciliation is not an optional part of being Christian; it is the hallmark of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

And it is the way to become truly human.