

Most of us cringe a little bit (or just pretend not to hear) when we come to the opening words of today's Gospel. "If another member of the church sins against you," Jesus tells his followers, "go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church."

Do you find Jesus' advice here at least a little bit uncomfortable? It almost sounds as if what Jesus wants is a one-person "truth-in-discipleship squad." And I don't really believe that's what Jesus intended. Surely, he must have known what our human tendencies would be, given such license. I certainly know people who act as if God commissioned them to set everyone straight. Don't you? It may be a husband who's constantly "correcting" his wife, or a parent who is forever belittling a child. That constant harping supervisor who won't get off your back. Surely this kind of unhealthy, destructive criticism is not what Jesus intends by his advice.

To illustrate the fuller meaning of our Lord's counsel, we need to draw on another confrontation story from the Scriptures. It's the story of Jesus and Peter at the post-resurrection fishing party. You'll recall how Peter denied Jesus three times just before the Crucifixion – and how Jesus had forewarned him that would happen. Now, not only was Peter denying Jesus – no less than seven of the disciples were arguing as to whether he really were the Messiah.

It is at breakfast with this crew that Jesus takes Peter aside for the now-familiar confrontation where he asks Peter thrice, "Do you love me?" Note what happens here. Jesus doesn't accuse. No judgment is cast. He simply asks – and says, "If you love me, feed my sheep." Three times – in three variations.

Do you see the dynamics of Jesus' encounter with Peter here? Jesus could have jumped all over him for his triple denial – but he didn't. In spite of his sin, Peter was accepted back into fellowship and commissioned for service. It was confrontation, but *loving* confrontation. Not easy to do – but necessary if we take sin seriously.

I can think of countless times when I've simply ignored a wrong or practiced a kind of denial that would prefer not to name sin for what it is. I think most of us have been in

such situations. Out of a false sense of humility we would rather keep quiet about blatant wrongdoing. We do not want to be judgmental. It is easier not to get involved. “Peace at any price” we call it – but the result is that painful differences are never resolved.

This contrasts so sharply with Jesus. He knew that to ignore flagrant sin is to implicitly condone it – to indirectly encourage it. Sin is never private. It always involves a breach of relationships:

- our relationship with God,
- our relationship with the person wronged,
- and with the entire community of faith.

Curiously, this passage from Matthew which finds so little use among most of the mainstream churches is a key passage in the disciplinary practices of a number of fundamentalist churches. While we shy away from the style of confrontation this gospel suggests, *they* see it as an important part of the relationship-restoring process. But unlike many of those churches, I would want to insist that, if we *did* make use of such a discipline, it not be seen as a matter of *punishment*, but, rather, a source of *healing*.

What Jesus suggests in today’s gospel is really not *con*-frontation, coming up against someone we find offensive. It is what one commentator called *care*-frontation. Jesus cared enough about Simon to confront him lovingly. Jesus’ counsel also suggests respect for the offending person. The confrontation begins (and hopefully ends) in private, “just between the two of you.” *Care*-frontation is not the product of arrogance, self-righteousness, or a will to dominate. Apart from humble self-examination and prayer, it is not constructive, or caring, at all.

In the past dozen or so years, I have seen – and I’m sure you have too – a terrible tendency on the part of this beloved Church of ours to just back off rather than lovingly confront the sins and ills that are working hard to debase and degrade our society. Isn’t it time we learned that sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to care enough to confront such a situation? Surely our current struggles with human rights and systemic racism in our society have caused us to rethink how helpful our “gentle politeness” really is.

M. Scott Peck, in *The Road Less Traveled*, put it this way: “To fail to confront when confrontation is required...represents a failure to love equally as much as does

thoughtless criticism or condemnation.... Mutual loving confrontation is a significant part of all successful and meaningful human relationships.” (p.153)

My friends, to love is to care enough to confront in the assurance that our ever-present Lord is the chief carer, the chief confronter, the chief reconciler. Let us pray for the strength to do that.