

Rev. Derek Fairman

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time A

In the Gospel, the Lord Jesus teaches us how to confront sin in the Church. The Lord teaches us to confront your brother or sister with this sin alone first. Only after the person refuses to repent should others be brought in. The Lord Jesus does not advise ignoring sin or hiding it. However, He does advise that when we deal with others, we keep in mind the virtue of discretion. We must be transparent, but we must also treat someone the way that we ourselves would want to be treated.

There is much that we can learn from this Gospel that applies to our own lives. There exists such a thing in our world as what we called in the seminary “fraternal correction.” I suppose that in the world at large we might say that it is “sibling correction.” It is the kind of correction that takes place not from a higher authority but from those of our own stature who are looking out for us, whether it be a family member, friend, co-worker or neighbor.

This kind of correction is a delicate enterprise; it is easily confused with tattling. There is however a difference. Tattling or false correction is ultimately destructive. The reason for doing so is quite simply to make myself look better by making others look worse. The Lord however gives us clues as to the difference between true correction and false correction. The first is that true correction is given in private first, while false correction is a flight to the highest (or most public) authority.

If you’re going to make yourself look better, you want and need someone to see it. You want to be recognized for what you have done. When we gossip or immediately bring the mistakes of others to light, we are merely trying to impress someone, whether an authority figure or others like us. If you are truly interested in correction, you will avoid having to unnecessarily embarrass your brother or sister out of consideration for that person’s feelings. You don’t care about yourself, but you are interested in helping someone avoid something that will cause harm.

Another clue is how we approach the sin or fault that the person has committed. The prophet Ezekiel hears from the Lord that he is designated as a watchman for Israel. He is to warn the people of what is coming because of their sins: If they sin they will die, but there is a responsibility that awaits the prophet. He must warn the people. If he does not, he will share in the responsibility for the death of the sinner. If the sinner repents, then the prophet will share in the responsibility for the sinner saving his life.

What the prophet Ezekiel is doing is providing foresight. He is like a watchman who serves atop a high place. As the watchman sees what is coming from on top of the ship or on top of the highest place in the city, so the word of the Lord comes so that the prophet can warn the people of the doom that is set to arrive there shortly because of their sins. The people had thought it unfair, that the Lord would send calamity upon them without "warning." Although the Lord's punishments upon them were not unfair, the Lord sent them a watchman to warn them.

What can we learn from this? True correction is about forewarning. Correction comes from the wisdom of understanding the way things work, or having made a similar mistake in the past. Correction comes as a warning, that the way a person is doing things will mean disaster down the road. False correction is ultimately about giving orders, even though we are not in a position to do so. It means that I want to know that I am better than someone. False correction is about punishing someone.

There is another important difference between false correction and true correction. More than likely, at some point we have received criticism or correction and didn't like it. I think many of us realize that we are not perfect and that we can do better. In some ways, we would rather receive comments than not receive comments. At least if someone has something to tell us, the person was paying attention and is brave enough and interested enough to help us do better. If someone doesn't tell us anything, we don't know what is coming.

However, it can make a big difference how we choose to phrase our comments, because the way that we choose our words reveals what kind of attitude we have towards the person. If we speak to someone condescendingly or as if we are giving orders, our comments will not be taken well. If we point out someone's faults in front of others, we will end up doing more damage than whatever good our comments might have done. If on the other hand, we take our Lord's instructions to heart, and exercise discretion, our comments will be the kind and helpful suggestions of a friend, and will more likely be taken well.

As we approach the altar we ask the Lord to receive His words of correction. He speaks to us through our conscience, and there He reproves us for the wrong that we have done. We must listen to what He has to say to us, realizing that the Lord speaks to our consciences gently and as a friend, not harshly. He has no need to make us look bad. He is motivated only by the deep love that He has for each one of us. Of anyone, the Lord Jesus is the One who is the watchman, looking out for our welfare.