

### **Correct Correction**

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: Compared to times past (and for better or for worse), it's a kinder, gentler society in which we live. I'm not sure, but I think maybe we can trace its roots back to the late fifties and early nineteen sixties when some highly influential child development books came on the scene. By studying these books, parents learned that the proper way to raise their children was to always reinforce and praise the positive, and never to offer any negative comment to criticize a child's bad behavior – which couldn't actually be called "bad behavior" because that would be a negative thing to say. Instead, if little Jonny were found playing with matches next to the gas can for the lawn mower in the garage, or chasing the cat through the yard snapping a pair of hedge trimmers after it, or laying on his back in a grocery store aisle kicking and screaming, throwing a violent tantrum because his every whim with regard to what went in the cart was not being obeyed, well, such behavior was to be called "unstructured creativity" or "experimental assertiveness" – something that had a positive ring to it. The idea was that the reason Jonny misbehaved was that angry people said and did things that hurt his feelings when he was only doing his level best to assert himself creatively in an unstructured sort of way. He acted badly because verbal (and yes, it's horrible to imagine, *physical*) discipline by the very people who said they loved him made him feel bad. No, the way to get Jonny to do positive things is to impress upon him what a good boy he really is. Tell the child he is good, praise his actions, and *he will do* good and praiseworthy things. ... Uh huh.

Anyway, that's my theory for how it started. But now these and other ideas like them have had several decades to percolate through (or fester within) society at large, and they've been extended to other social situations, so that these days pretty much the same rules apply to all human relationships. We're always to reinforce the positive, always to accept and tolerate the imaginative diversity in the words and actions of others without ever offering any kind of criticism or correction that might offend sensitive feelings. We're not to confront anyone in a negative sort of way. That's not a loving way to behave. I remember several years ago there was a popular expression that said, "Love means never having to say, "I'm sorry" – which is a pretty silly, as anyone who truly loves someone knows; but now a much more popular idea is that love means it's never acceptable to look someone in the eye and say, "What you're doing is wrong". And since these values so dominate the culture around us, it's no surprise that they are seeping into the church, both in terms of how we deal with each other on a personal basis, and also at the institutional level. Our Synod's dispute resolution process is a good example of this. It's our official method for dealing with conflicts between members. It was designed to create a win-win situation for parties in dispute. Regardless of the circumstances or what they're fighting about, we must never find in favor of one party, because that would mean finding *against* the other. Instead, we must keep working with both sides to seek a solution, some sort of mutually acceptable compromise, that allows them both to retain their pride, their points of view, and their positions. Everyone is always right, and no one is ever wrong. (And just in case you're wondering, yes, it works: it works just as well as all positive reinforcement and no discipline worked in getting little Jonny to behave appropriately.)

How very different are the three examples that we heard in this morning's Scripture readings. In the Old Testament, we have a case of someone confronting the sinner with his sin. It's the prophet Nathan who puts the finger on King David who, as you may recall, had recently been involved in adultery and murder – and who thought he got away with it. What's

remarkable is the way the prophet confronts David. He goes to him ostensibly to inform him about the crimes of one of his subjects: a rich man who stole his poor neighbor's sheep. And someone may think the prophet is just being tactful and discreet; but that's not it at all. It turns out to be a stealth attack. Nathan is setting a trap for David that he won't be able to escape. And it works. When David hears the story, he is incensed, and he decrees, "The man who did that deserves to die." And with those words, he slams the trap shut on himself. Nathan tells him, "You're right David, and *you are that man*; only you didn't steal a sheep: you stole a man's wife. And when you made her pregnant, you had him killed so that no one would find out." The prophet's attack on David is brutal. It strips away all his defenses and evasions, and leaves his black soul exposed, naked, and ashamed – which is exactly where it needs to be if there is to be repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God. That, of course, was the purpose of the confrontation: to restore David to the covenant of God's grace. And that does indeed happen; but there are bitter consequences nevertheless. Though David's sin is forgiven, he has to live with the fact that his infant son will die on account of his sin. The point to be made, however, is that David needed the confrontation. He needed someone who loved and cared for him enough to tell him that he was wrong.

We see Jesus doing the same thing in this morning's Gospel lesson; but the case is a little different. This time it's not the obvious sinner who's being confronted, but someone whose sin is a little harder to detect. David knew all about his sin, and hoped that it would not be discovered; Simon the Pharisee, on the other hand, hasn't got the foggiest notion that he's absolutely lost in his sin: the sin of self-righteousness.

Jesus has accepted an invitation to dine in Simon's home. This pleased Simon, because it would have been another feather in his already highly decorated cap to have the famous miracle-working Rabbi as one of his guests; not to mention an excellent opportunity for him and his friends to probe and perhaps discredit Jesus' more radical teachings. It happens that while they're dining that a notoriously sinful woman enters the room. She is likely the town prostitute – or perhaps I should say *former* prostitute: it's clear from her actions that she's had a life-changing encounter with the Savior, and now she wants to show her heartfelt gratitude. She has purchased an extremely expensive container of perfume with which to anoint Jesus. Normally such a product would be used very sparingly and then only on the head, but it seems that she does not consider herself worthy of presenting it that way. Instead, she lavishly uses it all on Jesus' feet, which she further anoints with her tears of gratitude – tears that I suspect Jesus valued far more than the costly perfume. All in all it is a tremendous outpouring of her love for her Savior in response to the forgiveness he gave her – which is precisely the point of the short parable that Jesus shares with Simon. For his part, Simon is horrified that Jesus, a man of God, would allow this disgraced woman to touch him. But like Nathan confronting David, Jesus invites Simon to walk into a trap so that he can reveal his sin and confront him it. "Who will love more", Jesus asks, "the one who is forgiven much or little?" Simon correctly deduces that someone having received much forgiveness would display the greater love. "Very good," says Jesus, "now let's apply what you have just said"; and then he begins contrasting the woman's overflowing love with Simon's comparatively stingy treatment of his honored guest. With each point he hammers away at Simon's hypocritical and loveless heart – and he does this in front of all the other guests – proving to him and everyone else that this woman they all look down on is a lot farther along on the path of righteousness than they are. She has shown that her sins, though many, have been forgiven. Their acts prove that their own sins have not been forgiven. It's a blistering indictment on the Pharisee and his guests – but again, the point is that without the confrontation Simon would never have known how lost he really was, and, I might add, we would not have known to see this same sin in ourselves.

Turning then to today's Epistle lesson, we have yet another even more public confrontation in which one person thumps another on the chest, and says, "What you're doing is wrong". This time the issue is one that most folks would think is pretty trivial – certainly nothing to get all worked up about. But that analysis would be wrong. At stake here is the very Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. David's sin and Simon's self-righteousness put them both in a state of jeopardy regarding their salvation – but Peter's seemingly innocuous behavior put the whole church at risk of losing the saving truth and being damned forever.

The situation was this: the early Christian church was headquartered in Jerusalem. That's where most of the apostles of Jesus still were – and of course, the vast majority of believers there were Jews. So, though they were now Christians, they had all grown up under the Law of Moses, and they continued to observe those laws – they were, after all, commanded by God. So they still circumcised their infant sons, observed the Jewish festivals, and they kept all the dietary restrictions: no pork, no shellfish, that sort of thing. And it only made sense: that's what they were comfortable with. It's the only life they knew.

Meanwhile, the good news of salvation in Jesus was spreading throughout the world. And one of the places it really took root was in the city of Antioch, which was a predominantly Gentile city. The Apostle Paul spent a lot of time working with the Christians there. And one of the big issues that came up very early was the question of whether these Gentile converts to Christianity should be required to obey all those rules that God gave the Jews. Paul came to realize very rapidly that these laws were not about questions of right or wrong. They were rather shadows of Christ in the Old Testament. Therefore he correctly concluded that it was not necessary for Gentile converts to observe them since they were all fulfilled in Christ. Who needs the shadow when you have the reality?

Well, a lot of the Jewish Christians had a hard time with that. They thought that if God commanded it to us, then it was for everybody. They thought that you couldn't really be a proper Christian unless you lived like a Jew. So there was this big debate as the church went through its first major doctrinal crisis. Finally it was decided that Paul was right: that the Gospel is about faith in Jesus Christ and his accomplished work on the cross, and not about following lots of ceremonial rules about what to eat and so on. *That* was the decision – and it was the right one because it kept the focus on Jesus and not on the works of the individual believer. But unfortunately there were a lot of Jewish Christians who weren't happy with that decision. They still thought that living like a Jew was the right way to go.

Then it happened that Peter went to Antioch to see how things were going and to help build up the church there. While he was there, he freely mingled with the Gentile converts. He ate with them in their homes and he didn't pay any attention to what he was eating. He wasn't keeping Kosher. But then, sometime later, along came another delegation of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem; and some of them were definitely the guys who thought that following the Jewish customs made you a better Christian. Peter knew this, and he didn't want to get a lot of criticism from them because of the way he had been behaving. So, when they arrived, he stopped mingling so freely with the Gentile Christians. He didn't eat with them anymore. Instead, he spent his time with Jerusalem folks, and he reverted back to all the Jewish customs to avoid offending them. And it happened that other Jewish Christians in Antioch, taking their cue from Peter, did the same thing.

But imagine how that looked to the Gentile converts. They had been told that there was no reason for them to follow those Jewish customs; that what they needed was faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior, and that faith in him made them the children of God and full heirs of the

eternal kingdom. Now they were *seeing* a different message being taught. Though Peter knew the truth, and though he would never stand in front of a group and teach them otherwise, his *actions* told these new Christians that following the Jewish rules really was important. It told them that they were second class Christians as long as they did not obey those rules – that faith in Jesus was not enough. And this just wasn't any person who was teaching this to them, it was *Peter*: the same Peter who walked on the water, who saw the Lord's glory on the mount of Transfiguration, and who was commissioned by the risen Lord to "feed my sheep". His example carried a lot of weight. Though he never intended it, they got the message loud and clear.

This is why Paul could not allow the situation to continue. And you'll note that he didn't pull Peter aside for a private conversation about it. Peter's public distortion of the Gospel message, whether intended or not, needed to be corrected publicly so that all would know and understand the truth. In front of the entire assembly, Paul told Peter, "Your actions are denying the very Gospel you proclaim. You are teaching these people that they must behave as Jews to be real Christians, and if that is true, then Christ died for nothing." Now, I suspect that Peter was embarrassed, that his Jewish friends were offended, and that many people thought that Paul's approach was inappropriate and unloving. But the truth is that when a leader of the church is leading people to hell, the loving thing to do is to put a stop to it. And that means standing up and saying, "What you're doing is wrong."

So what we've seen in these three examples from Scripture is that the Christian faith is inherently confrontational, and that it's right to be negative and to make corrections when someone is wrong. When calling the sinner to repentance, when uncovering a person's hidden sins – sins he doesn't even know about, or when defending the basic truths of the Gospel, there is a need and a loving purpose to telling someone, "What you're doing is wrong". We are to speak the *truth* in love. And *love* does not mean being namby-pamby about it. The examples we've seen this morning could not be described as especially gentle or tactful. They were direct, they were emphatic, and they offended the people who heard them. But it must be remembered that the goal of such Christian correction is always true reconciliation – reconciliation that can only be achieved when the person who is wrong admits his fault and turns to the truth.

Still, it's not easy, and no one likes to do it. Be it from lack of confidence, or fear of offending, or from our having assimilated cultural values that wrongly tell us that it's unloving, I'm sure that all us can think of times we've fled from the task and neglected to correct someone when it was called for. In so doing we failed in our duty to God, and failed to show true Christian love to a brother or sister in peril of losing their soul. So, today, for the times we have failed to confront the sinner and attempt to correct them, the Lord says to each of us, "What you're doing is wrong." With David, let it be that each one of us confesses, "I have sinned", that we may also hear the words of grace that make us one with Christ and with each other: "God has taken away your sin, for the sake of his Son who lived and died for you." In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***