

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
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23rd Sunday of Year A Mt 18:15-20

The Catholic novelist and short story writer, Flannery O'Connor, writes in one of her letters, "Be very careful if someone comes up to you and says, 'Sit down because I want to tell you something very frankly, and it's for your own good,'" because, O'Connor continues, "You can't be sure that what you're going to hear is in fact true, and it most likely won't be for your own good." There are people who have a passion for diagnosing the problems of everybody around them, except of course being able to take a good look at themselves. Armed with a few courses in psychology, or having read a couple of self-help books, or, best of all, enlightened by watching some recent guest of Dr. Phil, they proceed to apply what they've so recently learned to some easy target. A phrase such as, "I'm only doing this for your own good," is often suspect because what motivates the speaker to offer advice or criticism may simply be one of their own hidden and unrecognized character defects. It might just be a ploy at being one-up over another, an attempt to manipulate or control the other individual, perhaps a way of sabotaging an unsatisfying relationship, or simply a way of getting the monkey off one's own back by throwing it onto someone else's? The bringer of unsolicited advice may indeed be speaking with insight, compassion and wisdom, but O'Connor's warning is still well taken—you never know whose needs are really being served, the speaker's or the listener's.

St. Augustine in his writings speaks of the "truth that kills" and the "truth that gives life." It's a useful distinction because it helps us remember that while truth can exist in the abstract, when the truth is uttered in conversation, one has to be aware of how prepared is the listener to swallow the hard and bitter pill that's being offered for their alleged benefit. Sometimes telling a person what they are unequipped to accept or assimilate maybe just too devastating. It may likewise be of little value in affecting any change in that person's behavior. Brutal honesty doesn't "give life," if the listener is so wounded and hurt that he or she begins to shut down emotionally, if they perceive the remark as an attack, or if it's about something he or she couldn't change about themselves or their situation, no matter how much they might desire to do so. Of course, hard words need to be spoken in any relationship worth preserving, but if those words come across so harsh that they simply rub salt in open wounds, one has to ask why are they being said at all, whose needs are they serving—the speaker's or the listener's?

Today's Gospel has to do with the difficult task of speaking the truth in love, but

as Jesus outlines the process for dealing with some disapproved conduct, it becomes clear that one individual's private and solitary estimation of the matter should not be allowed to dominate the unfolding of events. If a conversation one-on-one is not successful in dissuading another from some sort of behavior, the disciples are told to go in groups of two or three to convince the person to change. The fact that others are enlisted for the job is to insure that the biases and prejudices of just one are not given free reign—that there is a consensus, rather than the coercion of one against another. So, at times judgments have to be made and acted upon, but judgments made not out of smug self-satisfaction, but for the genuine well-being of another.

One who is most definitely not qualified for the work of "fraternal correction" would be the person to whom this sort of job comes rather easily, one who thinks they have an aptitude for sizing people up, or seeing through people, or knowing always where things are at, etc. That kind of person should leave the job with those who do it only when they believe they have to; who act with a feeling of regret, perhaps even embarrassment; for whom it is a genuine love and caring that moves them to overcome their own private hesitations to do what has to be done. They know that if they don't do something, if they don't act right now, nobody else will, and that will lead to even greater pain and suffering for the person they want to help. And, one more thing we should be aware of, if we are really trying to be of help to someone. So often when we have to sit down with someone for a difficult conversation, we first rehearse that conversation in our mind, figuring out what I will say when he or she says what I expect them to say. But then are we really listening to the person whom we say we are trying to help, or is it just a monologue on our part that we are delivering?

One example of a small group getting together and acting out of love, perhaps even out of what might be called out of "tough love," but acting to save another's life might be what is known as an "intervention," in the life of some addicted individual. It is the case wherein the family members, friends and associates of the addict decide to come together as a group and confront the individual with his or her addictive behavior. They get that person in a room and each takes a turn of recounting some specific episode they've witnessed where the individual's life was out of control. But what they also let the person know is that they love him or her very much, and that's why they've agreed to take part in the session. Then, having heard all of these specific incidents recounted from different people, the addict is given the opportunity to go for professional help immediately. This is the truth spoken in love that is life-saving.

So, in reflecting on today's Gospel, let us pray that we can speak the truth in love when it has to be spoken, not in some self-serving way, not in a vindictive way,

but in a way always appropriate to the occasion—in a way that the listener can hear, because our speech brings life, not death. And, finally, let us pray that we can have ears to listen, when the truth, even the hard truth, is spoken to us in love.