**23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
Cycle A, 9.10.17  
Ezekiel 33:7-9/Romans 13:8-10/  
Matthew 18:15-20  

**LOVING CONFRONTATION – THE DEBT WE OWE TO ONE ANOTHER**

My hands were sweating and I felt my heart beating faster than normal. The coffee cup was empty; I hurried to the kitchen to fill it -- anything to stall, to steal a few moments of time so I could catch my breath and gain composure. The pastor’s voice sounded very serious when he stated toward the end of the staff meeting at the parish where I was working many years ago: “John, could I see you immediately after the meeting.” For several weeks there was a sense of unresolved tension between us and I knew from the look on his face that something I had said during the meeting disturbed him. I can handle a discussion of difficult topics or conflicting opinions in a group setting, but a one-on-one confrontation is not something I relish. Suddenly every feeling of anxiety of an errant child before his chiding parent flooded my imagination. I spilled some coffee on my pants as I sat down to hear a reprimand that I dreaded, but one that I needed.

![Confrontation](image)

Why is it that we will pay good money to a tennis or golf pro to change our habits or mend our ways on a playing field or fairway, yet we avoid at all costs the possibility that a peer might tell us something that needs correcting, something we’ve done wrong, some attitude that has interfered with the good order of the office, the household or the community? If a piano teacher or voice instructor doesn’t take an active role in helping us learn and correcting our errors, we would fault them and change teachers. We expect intense criticism from the hired teacher. We welcome correcting remarks as helpful to our growth. Yet we avoid like the dickens someone who, without personal invitation, would speak to us about our faults, who would advise us on our personal shortcomings or who would point out to us our failures and sins.

Criticism, more often than not, is seen as an intrusion. Our response is usually: “It’s none of your business!” or “Who do you think you are!” We take great consolation in the bible passage that says: *Take the plank out of your own eye before you remove the speck from your brother or sister’s eye.* How many marriages have ground to a halt because neither partner had the courage to confront? Mutual loving confrontation is a significant part of all successful and meaningful relationships.

A sailboat on the bay is in need of constant adjustment if it is to stay its course. Without the sailor keeping the sails in proper alignment, the boat will flounder and lose direction. The more graceful the boat appears to be sailing, the more constant are the corrections that the skipper is making to keep it on its course or to bring it in line when the winds shift. The Word of God today gives us solid advice about staying on course. It helps us to understand, difficult though it may be, how the correction of others can be a tool for growth, not a source of annoyance.
The gospel presents us with a problem faced by the early Christian community. What do we do when a member goes astray? Their understanding of Jesus’ commandment of love wouldn’t allow them to stand idly by or to ignore the brother or sister, the community member who was in trouble. So, following the Jewish prescriptions for community life, the gospel advised a three-fold process of correction, a three-step procedure to help an individual adjust his or her sails to get the boat back on course. To be in community means to care about one another, especially the hurting or suffering member.

I grew up in a tightly-knit Christian community. There was a sense of looking out for one another, and that “looking out” included correcting faults and erroneous ways. I remember how difficult it was as a child to get away with unacceptable behavior in the neighborhood -- which extended further than just the street you lived on. One day when I was fourteen and wanting to start smoking, I boldly snuck a cigarette from my father’s dresser drawer and lit up one night walking down a street several blocks away from our house, where I thought I was a safe distance away. I was really cool -- that is, until I got home, walked in the door and found my mother waiting there for me with a look that said: ‘I know where you were; I saw what you did.’

“Mrs. Krajewski called a few minutes ago,” my mother said. “She thought she saw you walking down Tecumseh Street smoking, but then she knew you were too young so she figured she made a mistake. It couldn’t have been you, could it?” I hated nosy Mrs. Krajewski for not minding her own business. But how different an attitude and an era where people looked out for one another. What a contrast to the stories today of people looking the other way when someone is robbed or even beaten because we’re afraid to do anything, because it’s not our place to interfere or correct someone else. How many bullies get away with their cruelty, how many prejudiced people continue in their ignorance because we refuse to challenge or speak up, to be prophets like Ezekiel and Paul?

In our anonymous communities it’s difficult to see ourselves as being responsible for one another. Oh, we acknowledge the faults of others, but usually in the form of gossip, instead of going directly to a person and lovingly confronting him or her. It’s much easier to talk to everyone else about the person instead of talking to the one at fault. St. Paul says: “Owe no debt to anyone... except the debt that binds us to love one another.” That debt includes challenging one another to grow and correcting one another when we find each other going astray. ‘God minced no words when he commissioned the prophet Ezekiel with his task: If you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but I will hold you responsible.

What prevents us from carrying out this difficult yet essential part of gospel living -- being watchful and on guard for each other’s well-being, especially when we
stray? And what can we do about it? The gospel’s three-fold process of correction can’t work unless we build community. People can approach each other on that level only when we know each other. We need to talk to each other every time we gather so that we can see each other as significant members of this family of faith. Then we can have a vested interest in each other. We’ll begin to feel a sense of responsibility for one another’s well-being. Our ties will expand beyond our own family and neighbors. There are practical ways for doing that: socializing after Mass brings people together and generates a feeling of community that goes beyond prayer. Small group settings like Bible study groups and faith-sharing gatherings foster a sense of belonging to one another. Being a member of one of the parish service groups -- the choir, a religious education teacher, youth group, a liturgical minister -- strengthens the ties that brings people together. Even a parish website and Facebook page is a small but good way to know and see each other as members of a family of faith.

love. How can we ever hope to approach one another in mutual correction if we don’t approach each other with at least a simple “Hello”? Give it a try. It’s at least a good starting point.

John Kasper, OSFS

I’m glad we’ve ended the “no talking in church” rule that many of us were taught years ago. This is a place where we should be talking and laughing and crying when necessary, and sharing our lives. Otherwise we’ll be an anonymous group of Catholics instead of a Christian community bound by