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Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault . . .”

Yes! I've been waiting for this. And I have the blessing and permission of the highest authority there is. “Go and **tell him his fault . . .**” Yes! **I can't wait to get started.**

-Oh, wait. Did I really need Jesus' permission to do this? The truth is, I've already been doing this for a very long time. I criticize. I put down. I lash out. I name-call. I mock. I'm glad **Jesus is on board** with all of that.

-Of course, he **isn't**. You know that and I know that. Today's Gospel reading is one of those passages that seems, on the surface, to give us permission to **tap into some of our worst instincts.**

-Most of us aren't that ok with the failings and faults and weaknesses and sins of others --- especially when **we are the one on the receiving end** of bad behavior. And many of us can't wait to **unload** on that person or persons, let them “have it”, scold them, and put them “in their place”. (Of course, not one of us would be ok with being the recipient of such criticism, but let's save that for another homily.) And yet, the truth is, today's Gospel passage is really not about any of that anyway (no matter how badly we would like it to be).

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault . . .”

-What does Jesus actually expect of us?

-It seems to me that one key to what Jesus is getting at can be found in the very first line from today's Second Reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans. He writes,

“Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; . . .”

-This simple (yet profound) line from Paul gets at the very **heart of the matter**. You see, there really is only **one acceptable motive for everything and anything that we do** --- from the smallest act to the largest one, from the most important kinds of endeavors to the seemingly insignificant ones, from the actions directed toward those closest to us to the few words we might speak to a stranger --- and that motive is **LOVE**.

-If we're not saying or doing something for **that particular reason**, or if **love is absent** from our hearts, we truly need to question why we are doing it at all.

-And that gives new meaning to what Jesus is telling us when he says,

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault . . .”

The truth is, if we see these words as simply a **command to “correct” others**, we most certainly will act with less than pure motives --- motives which have much more to do with **retribution or ridicule or self-righteousness** than with love of neighbor.

-But if we can see this command as shedding light on our sacred responsibilities toward one another to **help one another be the very best that we can be**, be the wonderful people God created us to be, be channels of God's love and grace and mercy and generosity --- we will know that we are on the right track --- know that we are **closer to what God expects from us**.

-And that's a whole different kind a motive --- a motive which stems from a deep desire to **look out for one another**, help one another, and **walk hand in hand** along a journey to being **better people** and helping bring about a **better world**.

-Love is the only acceptable motive.

-And yet, while our motives are **critical** to living a **faith-filled life**, the means are **critical too** --- the **WAYS** we go about trying to help others be the beautiful people God created them to be. In other words, just **having** the best of intentions **doesn't** mean that precisely **WHAT we are doing is right, just, or helpful**. The words matter.

The tone matters. The situation matters. Our past history with that person matters. The emotional state of that person matters. When it comes to discussing these difficult issues with others there are **countless ways we can mess it up**, countless ways we can make things worse, countless ways we can have the **opposite effect we intended**.

That means that usually:

Less is more.

And infrequent is better than often.

And listening is more important than talking.

And kindness trumps anger or disappointment.

And “me too” should be uttered at every opportunity.

And of course, talking privately (not publicly) is the only way to go.

Just a few simple thoughts as we struggle to **understand what God wants of us** when it comes to having these kinds of challenging conversations with others. As you can probably imagine, these things are never easy. Maybe the best rule of thumb is the most obvious:

Would you or I be **ok** with the **other person** saying those **same things to us**?

If not, maybe what we were about to say **shouldn't be said at all**.