

Spineless jellyfish have the hardest time with this Gospel-- people who see that other people are doing something wrong. But no matter how much they want to confront them, no matter how many times they practice what to say, when the moment comes to speak up they melt like marshmallows in the micro. Correcting other people is an art and if we can't find the right words to say, we may either strike out with a clumsy insult or just clam up. If someone you live with has a habit that annoys you, I'll bet you find it easier to live with the habit than to confront it.

Now, other people are quick to point out faults. They just relish the chance to complain about other people to their faces. You often see this happen in public. For example, you may feel so close to someone else, that you know if you poke fun at that person in public, he or she probably won't fight back in public, and in the end you can be forgiven. But in many cases, you don't feel close enough to that person to talk about the problem in private; that might feel scary. So, often we belittle people we love in public. Sometimes it brings about the correction we want, but more often than not it only stretches our rubber band taut.

There must be a better way. Jesus proposes that going public with someone's faults is the last thing we should do. First we should confront the offender in private. This keeps it in the family, and besides, it's a courtesy to preserve the honor of the offender. If private consultation doesn't work, Jesus suggests you bring in two or three witnesses. Still done in a semi-private forum, this lets the offender know it's not one person's beef. If that still doesn't work, go public. Involve the community. As we share each other's honor, so we share each other's shame. And if after all this the offender still doesn't reform, forget about it, it's not worth the agony.

If you decide to correct someone else, there are a few tips to keep in mind. First, be sensitive to whatever problems that person may be dealing with; you may need to be tolerant of them. Second, be sure to affirm good things about that person at the same time. Say, "You're good when you. . .," or "I appreciate it when you. . ." so the person knows you're correcting out of love. Then, speak about the offense as your problem. For example, don't say "You shouldn't smoke." Say, "I get headaches when you smoke here," or "I'm concerned about your health." The problem doesn't belong to someone else, it belongs to the one who feels offended. And it's a good way to check our motives. Are we really concerned about that that person's health, or are we trying to get back at them for something else?

Correcting other people is more than a nice idea. It's a responsibility we share. If someone is acting in the wrong we must speak up, it's part of our job in the community.

This is good to remember when criticism is turned back to us. If giving correction is an art, so is receiving correction. If any community is to grow--whether it be a parish, a family, a work team, or a bunch of friends--if that group is to grow, it will flourish if it does both well: giving correction and receiving correction in a spirit of love.