

In an article entitled *Six Stories of Sin*, Brian Doyle recounts confessions made to parish pastors or priests. A few do seem a bit shy of the mark – here’s one confession:

“The admission of assault (but not battery) on a squirrel...by a home owner, occasioned by what the home owner characterized as ‘Continual, deliberate provocation’ by the squirrel in question, upon which the home owner’s temper finally snapped, and he did roar at, threaten, insult, denigrate and impugn the squirrel, about which the home owner felt awful later.”

Another was the sin of running up the score of a little league game because one of the coaches had once dated and rather unceremoniously dumped the wife of the other coach. Faced with the opportunity to avenge his wife’s offense, the coach told his team to apply the full-court press despite the team being up by 24 points. The coach felt guilty the next day and sought the counsel of the priest, who asked him if he’d like to confess. The coach replied, “Well, no. We only won by 32. That’s not a sin – winning by 50 would have been a sin.”¹

That’s not really sin, is it?

And then there are the times when there is no mal-intention, just thoughtlessness. I am in mind of a time my friend Sally was seated with her back to the door of a restaurant during a cold snap, and each time the door would swing open, she’d brace herself for the cold blast. Finally the door stayed open and she reflexively said, loudly, “CLOSE THE DOOR,” only to turn around and see that the very elderly lady coming into the restaurant had gotten the wheel of her oxygen tank caught on the doorframe.

¹ Brian Doyle in *The Christian Century* July 23, 2014

Then there was the time when I was having such a rotten day and I'd gone to Brooks Brothers to buy some pants and when I had to buy the larger size was so utterly rude to the clerk that I didn't even make it to the car before I knew I had to go back to the store and apologize.

Any one of us can, if we are honest, remember a time when we know we should have acted better. We can remember a time when we could have acted better. That's only one of a multitude of reasons why I do not have a fish on the trunk of my car... I'd constantly have to apologize.

We all know when we should have done better.

We all know when we need to confess our sin – I appreciate the honesty of those of you who tell us that we don't leave enough time between the corporate confession and assurance of pardon... I appreciate the honesty it takes to admit that we're already passing the peace and you're not yet gotten through Tuesday's confession.

This is all well and good, but what about when the equation reverses? What about when you're the wronged party?

And what about when it really matters?

It's fine to laugh and chuckle about slapstick sins, but what about when it really matters, when you're the one who is hurt to the core, when you're not a hundred percent sure you even want to reconcile what is wrong?

How hard is it then to follow Jesus's commandment?

This is basic good advice for resolving differences.

And it is advice that most of us won't ever actually follow.

Look at what he says: If someone sins against you, you have to tell them.

I don't know about you, but I'm not inclined to tell someone if they hurt my feelings.

I'm much more inclined to stew about it.

We might even be inclined to talk about it too – to other people.

Edwin Friedman calls this triangulation. Don't tell the person who hurt your feelings, tell someone else and then you expect them to tell the person who hurt your feelings and it's all handled behind the scenes.

If someone sins against you – tell them when it is just the two of you.

Don't gossip about it.

Don't bring in a third party.

Don't simmer and seethe. Tell the truth.

That's so hard to do. But if you do it, Jesus says, that one is regained. Community is preserved. I wish I could tell you that I have a perfect track record on this, but I don't.

Maybe you don't either. We should take note for ourselves.

Only after step one can we go to step two.

Step two is when another person goes with you to deal with the sin. And note that it is not triangulation, it's still direct communication. If someone has hurt you, you still have to tell them.

Then comes stage three. This the stage where the whole church gets involved. I have to confess this seems impracticable to me at this point, and it's not just because I'm the pastor and I know I'm going to have to listen to it all if we go down this road, and I'm a little afraid that it's going to read a little like the story of six sins with which we started today.

There's a difference between annoying and irritating someone and sinning against them.

Annoying someone is just that. It's grit in the gears. It's personalities not jiving. It's differences of opinion on things that sometimes matter a great deal but at the end of the day it's still just opinion.

Sin is different. Sin is brokenness.

If you annoy me, I'm probably not going to tell you. If I annoy you, I probably don't need to hear about it.

But if the relationship between us is broken, we have a responsibility to address it. If the relationship between you and your child is broken, it needs to be addressed. If the relationship between you and the person you share your life with is broken, it needs to be addressed. God does not want us to persist in brokenness. And brokenness is the path of least resistance. That's why it's so pernicious. That's why Jesus knows how deadly it is to remain in sin. Because Sin is brokenness and sin causes brokenness.

Sin caused Ferguson.

Sin caused ISIS.

Sin caused that in your life that you don't want to name but you know is not right, and mine too.

We can't live in brokenness.

Not all resolutions are neat and clean. Not all resolutions are happy. But the idea of continuing in brokenness runs counter to the wholeness that God wants for us.

God wants us to be whole. God wants that for us individually, and God wants that for communities.

It's the most extraordinary basic good advice that most of us won't follow...but it's not just advice... it's a command.

What Jesus is commanding is community. It's real community, not just associations, and nice acquaintanceship, but real and deep community that cares for the fabric of creation in a way that drafts us into God's creative and redemptive activity.

It is also costly. If you follow Jesus's command, it is going to cost you. It exacts a cost to tell the truth when we don't want to.

You know, there's a real difference between what is expensive and what is costly. What is expensive may or may not be worth much. My car's expensive, but at the end of the day, it's not worth a thing other than money.

But real relationships where truth is told and burdens are shared – that's costly. That's worth something. Real relationships where when the world comes crashing in those sisters and brothers will be there – that's important. That's costly. That's worth the discomfort and unease of telling the truth.

There's one last thing Jesus said about this – he said if those steps don't work, let the sinner be like a tax collector or a gentile to you.

That sounds so harsh, and surely it is. I don't know if he knew that most of us won't get to that point with someone – we'll give up far sooner than that – but here's the thing for us to remember – Jesus had a real thing for tax collectors and gentiles. He kept sharing meals with them. SO when you've exhausted Jesus's teachings on the one who has sinned against you, just remember that Jesus isn't exhausted yet.

And that is good news. That is the promise of the Gospel: God is never done with us.

Always remember that Jesus had a thing for tax collectors and gentiles.

Forgiveness is about the most important thing that we can offer one another. It is what God has given us. And it is costly to forgive.

And forgiveness doesn't mean giving the offending party what they want. It means releasing yourself from holding that burden and relinquishing your claim to vengeance. Elsewhere in the pages of the Bible, we read that we are not supposed to give our offering with a grudge on our hearts², so if you are harboring a grudge, you best let the plate go by – let the church carry the giving for you for this week. Nor are we to approach the Lord's Table for communion without examining ourselves – you can't feed a grudge from this table, so you best pass the plate on by.³

I have spent most of my ministry working to ensure that the church is a place of deep hospitality and welcome. I have worked for the hallmark of my ministry to be inclusivity. It matters deeply to me to know that you know that all are welcome at this table.

But I would do you a disservice today if I told you that you should come to this table and feed yourself here while you're harboring grudges.

I know many of you know the ancient Cherokee wisdom about the two wolves within each of us vying for control of our souls – the one is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, you know how it goes – and the other wolf is goodness, benevolence, generosity, truth – all of the virtues we call the fruits of the spirit. As the story culminates, the young man asks his grandfather which wolf will win.

“The one you feed,” he replies.

You must deal with those who have sinned against you. Jesus has told you how.

The promise that I can tell you about is that this table will always be here to welcome you and your reconciled sister and brother when you return.

² Matthew 5:4

³ 1 Corinthians 11:27

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.