My friends, all of us need to be corrected at times for wrongs that we do, for things we have said or perhaps we shouldn't have said. It’s no fun though; however all of us need to be open for the possibility for correction, and also forgiveness and reconciliation. We also have had at some time the task of correcting someone for his/her actions. For most people, this is a very unpleasant task. Nobody should really enjoy having to tell a friend, family member, or co-worker that he/she has to correct behavior. At times, however, we have the Christian obligation to point out sinful or destructive actions or patterns. As Ezekiel challenges us in the first reading, "warn the wicked, trying to turn him from his way".

When we are in a situation where we need to confront someone, Jesus gives us very practical guidelines for brotherly/sisterly correction in the Gospel reading. These guidelines are a helpful reminder to keep a spirit of Christian love. First of all, Jesus tells us to try to settle our differences directly with that person if at all possible so to avoid misunderstanding and the damaging effects of gossip. If there is no fruit there, Jesus suggests bringing a couple friends or family members to help with this, an intervention so to speak. The principle Jesus is suggesting to us is called subsidiarity.

What is subsidiarity? Subsidiarity is the principle that problems should be worked out at the most local level. When a problem exceeds the most local level's ability to cope with the problem, we ask the next regional authority to move in, etc. For example, when siblings can’t determine for themselves who gets the remote control to the TV set, a parent might step in and solve that problem for them, maybe even by taking away the remote and handing them both a book to read instead. As an example in the city of Woodinville, it would probably be overkill to send in the National Guard to handle a shop lifter. We might need the National Guard if we had a devastating earthquake like we recently saw in Mexico. There is much to pray about in our world these days. Cities like Houston or Miami can handle most storms that come their way. When a hurricane like Harvey or Irma comes around, these cities require State and Federal assistance. That is what we mean by subsidiarity and we have an opportunity this weekend at mass to help support the relief efforts underway for victims of Hurricane Harvey.

In the spirit life, subsidiarity is also a helpful principle. Subsidiarity puts responsibility where responsibility is due: at the most local level beginning with the person we see in the mirror. And there is the rub. We have all had the task of correcting someone for his/her actions. Nobody should enjoy doing this. But who here really enjoys it when someone turns the tables and corrects us? What if we are the one needing correction? Because we are human, the initial response from us may be belligerence. How dare you say that I need correcting? I was born without sin after all! I say belligerence and not defensiveness, because whether or not the critique coming our way is justified, being defensive is human. There is nothing wrong with that. People have the right to give a defense, belligerence is something else. It can emerge from either party in
a dispute. You see, pride can muddy our ability to ascertain if a critique is true or not. This is why subsidiarity is so important. It calls us to be mature enough to have a civil conversation with those we have difficulty with. Subsidiarity can also mean that we need to have in our lives a few people who we can honestly talk to, who can give us an objective take on what is going on in our lives, who can help determine if the critique coming our way is justified or not. Or, whether or not the critique I am about to unleash on someone else is justified or not. Confiding in spouses or a close friend isn’t gossip by the way, it is therapy.

Life is so messy at times. I don’t know about you, but whenever I get critiqued, at first it feels like a duck waddled up and nibbled me. That is what it feels like to me. One or two ducks can pinch a bit. A flock of ducks can kill you! But I will be the first to say, most of the duck nibbles I have received in life have been justified and helpful. It is how we grow. I think I shared with you this story before, but just in case. Many years ago, I sat at the intersection light waiting for the light to turn green at an intersection that had nobody around. I mean nobody in either direction as far as the eye could see. It felt like Rip Van Winkle waiting for the light to turn. I could feel my beard growing. After what seemed like an eternity, I decided to simply drive through that miserable light. Seconds later, blue and red flashing lights were in my rear view mirror. Evidently, there was someone else around after all. After pulling over, I rolled down my window and said, “Forgive me officer for I have sinned.” I thought that was funny. He didn’t. He just looked stone faced at me, no sense of humor at all. He saw my collar and wagged his finger at me, “My brother is a Lutheran minister, and you clergy are the worst drivers on the road.” He was nice enough however to let me off with a warning. I was fairly rebuked for my driving. Excellent duck nibble. Lesson learned. On the bigger nibbles that come my way, however, I have a few spiritual advisors on my proverbial speed dial, as I am sure you do, that I talk with regularly, and who are honest with me. I say this because it takes humility to ask for advice from those we trust on the more serious critiques we get. It is important though. Otherwise, how do we grow?

Of course, both you and I know, there are times when the serious disagreements and broken relationships we experience can’t be worked out much in this life, with the exception of prayer. We can always pray for those we can’t reconcile with. I have been a confessor long enough to know that some disagreements will have to wait until the next life to work out. This is why by the way the doctrine of purgatory is very helpful to me. If we are blessed to be there after we die, all our broken relationships will be healed before entering into heaven. You see, God is the ultimate authority when it comes to how we conduct our lives. And, he judges by the principle of subsidiarity, at the most local level, beginning with us as individuals.

The truth is: the process of correcting someone or ourselves for that matter ought to be an activity of love. And this isn’t always easy. Christ commands us to love God and love neighbor. The Gospel today reminds us of how complicated this can be for us. St. Paul is very helpful in giving us a road map when it comes to correcting someone. St. Paul reminds us in the second reading that, "Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:8-10). This is why we ought to never correct
somebody out of a spirit of vengeance but rather out of a spirit of justice and right relationship with God. When we are wronged by someone, love looks like the need to pray for that person.

Meanwhile, the justice we should seek in life ought to also fit within the framework of subsidiarity, namely how am I part of the solution or part of the problem. Justice ought to be never at odds with Jesus' commandment to love. Rather, justice ought to be seen as a function of God's love, for "God is Love" says 1 John 4:16. We all know how the idea of love can be distorted or misunderstood. It is good to consider what St. Paul had to say about love, with the intention of clearing up any misunderstanding of what, as Christians, we are called to do in life, especially when tasked with correcting others.

St. Paul writes,

“If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, (love) is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.” As you know, he concludes with, “So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

My friends, the Gospel this weekend challenges us to grow as a people of real love, mature love, and sometimes, yes, tough love.