My desire to talk to someone directly about an issue that lies between us is directly related to how receptive I believe they will be.

For instance, if you ask me something and you seem angry or your words lead me to believe you are antagonistic, I am more likely to talk to you, to directly work with you on whatever is going on than if you passively become quiet or distance yourself in a manner that seems to hold me at bay...because the interaction began with honesty.

I would rather have honest, passionate engagement than passive game playing that leaves me wondering and spinning in my desire to connect and resolve an issue. I don’t like conflict much, but I truly despise deceit and indirect patronization. Those leave me flat. I have no time for them.

So in this passage, where Jesus says to go directly to the one who has sinned against you, I hear a few things…you need to know how you define sin. What does it mean to have someone sin against you? Webster’s defines sin as a violation of moral law, a reprehensible act, a serious shortcoming, or a transgression of God’s law. If someone sins against me, that mean they have morally acted against me. My character has been slandered, my ethics have been trashed, my sensibilities have been deeply wounded. In this case, I am to go directly to my sister or brother and have a conversation.

Jesus says, “If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you’re not listened to”…there is a next step.

Now, in this passage “listen to” is an idiom, a kind of slang expected to be understood by the reader to mean more than just “listen to.” When I say, “really” it is an idiom that means a variety of things depending on the situation. So it is with “listen to” in this scripture. “Listen to’” is the same “listen to” used when Abraham listened to Sara and slept with Rahab. This “listened to” is about obedience, it is about hearing and responding as the accuser expects the offender to respond.

So when you go to the person, you are to have an end goal in mind. What do you really want from them? A formal apology? A promise to never do this again? A hug or some monetary compensation? What do you want them to listen to? What do you want the person to understand and take away? What would make you feel heard?

//Paul tells us that we are to “owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” When Love is added to your expectation, it changes the focus. Money, power, status fall away. Love is a different kind of compensation. It requires you to know yourself; it requires you to add forgiveness and grace, even mercy, into that which needs to be heard.

As a mediator, I get to help people discern what would be just compensation for the violation they have received. Walmart often simply wants an apology and repayment for items taken in shop lifting cases; sometimes they ban an individual from shopping at their store. Individuals want more personal responses, often…a letter of apology, yes, but also time to work together, a time to renew the relationship, a time to form a relationship (as in: I would like the offender to work 2o hours with me at the animal shelter). Restoring a relationship to justice, smoother edges and centered awareness, is a practice and a discipline that is of the Christian faith.

// This command of Jesus’ is about restoring relationship, not so much about making the person become a puppet for your needs, but about becoming connected in a healthy and open manner. Airing grievances is a healthy way of being in relationship. Opening *this* can of worms has a refreshing, a restorative power only when we are both willing to discover what those worms are about…and there is a line between us and Jesus in this way.

Jesus extends grace beyond our understanding. Jesus opens the can of worms with me every time I do not love first, every time you and I choose our own moral vision, every time we do not allow the other person the ability to speak directly to us, Jesus approaches us for a conversation. …Jesus didn’t go to the disciples and complain about Judas, nor did he become fragile around the message of his death and resurrection: Jesus spoke *truth*, *speaks* truth, directly, lovingly, honestly while continuing to remain in relationship no matter our moral disagreements with God, our sins against God.

I may believe that those in the LGBTQIA community live apart from God’s commands, yet there is no place that the prophets or the scholars, or the Gospel writers tell us that God only loves people who are heterosexual. There was a time when people thought interracial or interdenominational unions were immoral. God does not say that people of color cannot marry people of lighter color; God does not say that a person who is Jewish cannot marry a person who is Catholic. God does not lift up one skin color over another, God does not lift up vegans over carnivores…and the list goes on. Who does God condemn? Those who will not seek to be loving...and there is even grace for people who will not be loving. God alone is the judge and jury of our souls.

//At the end of our passage, we hear Jesus say this, “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Over and over in the testaments we hear that God loves everyone, and those who have not heard are to hear of God’s love from God’s people. Gentiles and tax collectors are to be loved, forgiven, offered God’s good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection such that they, too, can listen to God’s message and, by the Holy Spirit, come to believe. Why would you want to bind yourself in the eternal kingdom? What is the focus of your control? Withholding the gifts of God from any person binds what is withheld to you, not to the other person.

To set one’s mind on things of God, putting on the lord Jesus Christ is to make no provisions for the flesh, only the spirit, by God’s Spirit. Your comfort is not the goal. God’s love freely given is the goal. //

Today, we prayed, “Lord God, enliven and preserve your Church with your perpetual mercy.” We believe and call to God to continue to give us that which God asks us to offer to others…mercy beyond understanding. We continued in prayer, “without your help we mortals will fail; remove far from us everything that is harmful and lead us toward all that gives life and salvation.”

May we truly pray for this perpetual mercy to be ours, may we truly believe that we have the ability to walk as the Spirit directs, opening to the world God’s eternal blessing and peace, and may we enter heaven unbound except by the deep and ever abiding love of God.

Amen.