

A T-shirt I thought about getting featured the state of Minnesota on it, with the words “Keep Minnesota Passive Aggressive.” And having lived here my whole life, I will say I’ve been a part of that behavior, and also the recipient of it. Meaning sometimes we can be very polite on the surface, but deep down also not always say what we mean or feel. At it’s best, this might be something nice to do in a social situation, but more often than not, this type of behavior can just prolong problems among families, with friends or at work. Sometimes we can’t just be Minnesota nice, but if we truly want to make a relationship improve, have to be willing to say what needs to be said (to that person, not to other people in hopes it will get to them!) and what we truly mean. It might not be fun or comfortable at first, but it also just might lead to a long term solution. For although we should be willing to overlook minor offenses, there are some problems that will only grow worse if they are not dealt with in a straightforward way. The American Businessman and Author Robert Kioysaki perhaps said it best: “A lot of people are afraid to tell the truth, to say no. That’s where toughness comes into play. Toughness is not being a bully. It’s having a backbone.” The question for us is are we willing to tell the truth, even when it’s difficult, or do we prefer to just avoid confrontation or kick the can down the road? Confrontation isn’t always easy, but when we aren’t afraid to do what needs to be done or say what needs to be said, a lot of good can emerge both for ourselves and for others.

Many of us learn this at an early age, when, as our conscience develops, we learn the importance of doing the right thing.

Valerie Howlett, who does a lot of youth outreach work, recalls a story of learning something just as important as academics in the 7th grade, and that was learning how to grow a spine.

As she recalls her story, she says that looking back on middle school, she doesn’t remember the important things like student council elections, school dances or most of algebra, but she will always remember the little things, like a single bench in the gym locker room, because that is where she started the slow process of growing a spine.

It was 7th grade, and it was supposed to be the turning point of her middle school career.

Sixth grade had been rough, as she went into the middle school with the other more “mature” kids from elementary, the girls as she put it who cared more about nail polish and gossip than reading and pretend. In fifth grade, she had scorned these kinds of girls, but in sixth grade she found herself trying to fit in with these same girls.

And so she gossiped and schemed her way into a small group. There were four kids: Tina, Ashley, Katie and Valerie. Tina was the ringleader, the Queen of Hearts as she put it. Most of the time was spent trying to get on her good side, and neurotically worrying that she was talking about you behind your back. Much like the fictional Queen of Hearts from “Alice in Wonderland,” Tina’s whims were subject to change, and she chose a different group member to ostracize every month. (Only instead of “Off with her head! It was more like “Off of our exclusive lunch table!).

Val reflects that one might ask why would one stay friends with a person like that. And what it came down to she says was fear. She was a spineless person who avoided confrontation whenever possible and had relied on her friend Jesse, who she had to leave behind when they

changed schools, for protection throughout her childhood. Being in the group meant protection. A place to sit at lunch, someone to walk with between classes. Being friends with Tina was better than being confronted by her. And she thought it would only last a year, for come 7th grade, Jesse would be in her school, and all would be well. Fall rolled around, and she reconnected with Jesse, who introduced her to her new friend Alice, whom she recalls as an unsure-looking, fast talking girl. Val hoped the three of them would have a great year as the best of friends.

But when that fall school year began, she found that they had been assigned to different classes. She and Alice to 7X and Jesse to 7Y. Val looked twice at her paper in shock. The unthinkable had happened: she would be assigned in clique land for two more years until Junior High was over. Alice was nervous, but Jesse reassured her that Val is her best friend and that she'd take good care of her.

The first class was art, a room with huge double desks. In the clique, there was an arrangement. Whenever the class had to pick partners, Val was with Katie, leaving Tina free to sit with the marginally cooler Ashley. So Val found herself hovering in the back of the Art room, starting at two empty chairs. Would she abandon Katie and risk Tina's possessive wrath, or sit with Alice, whom she didn't even know? She chose Alice.

When she walked in and sat down, Tina confronted her.

"So are you like dumping Katie now?" She asked.

"Of course not" Val said. "I can be friends with both of them."

This was easier said than done. Alice's presence threw off the number of girls in class from 8 to the uneven 9, so the partner issue came up. Val suggested asking the teacher for a third person, but Katie was adamant that only two people could be partners. So being her typical spineless self, Val gave in and left Alice alone.

After a few weeks of trying to bounce between Alice and the group, Tina decided it was time to be more forceful. "Why are you hanging out with Alice anyway?" She demanded, as they walked to gym class. "She doesn't even like you. She's just using you because she has no friends."

Val walked on to the locker room, to the gym bench where the group always changed clothes, fear clenching up in her stomach, her heart pounding. Nothing would ever change. She asked herself why did she bother to help Alice, who she hadn't really bonded with. She rationalized she had nothing in common with her.

When Alice dumped her gym bag on the bench and Tina said, "There isn't really room for you," Val stood silently, and watched Alice leave, as she thought of the words of her friend Jesse - "she'll protect you." And it hit her. It didn't matter if Alice and her never got close. What did matter was what was going on. The girls in her group were not the kind of people she wanted to be.

Val looks back on this moment as the time when she grew up. While she didn't confront Tina then and there, the transition began. She never chose the group over Alice again. She started standing up to Tina. And once Tina saw that Val wouldn't be a doormat anymore, she suddenly started changing too, and decided Alice was cool. They were a group of five for the two months before Tina moved to another state.

A few weeks after the gym bench incident, Alice called her with a homework question. They got onto the topic of books, and found they liked the same authors and talked for hours. Now ten years later as she wrote her story, they are still close friends.

That friendship might not have happened though had not Val truly grown up by no longer giving into the actions of a group that were wrong, and doing the right thing by saying, through her actions, that what was going on was wrong. For it to happen took her no longer being passive, but active and standing up to Tina.

This kind of thing is of course not limited to middle school. Situations arise all the time where we see bad behavior going on - at the Little League games, in the office, under our own roofs, and in our neighborhoods. The challenge for you and me is what do we do about it?

The solution per a t-shirt I saw that said "Keep Minnesota Passive Aggressive" might be to drop subtle hints of what is wrong, or tell a third party in hopes they get word back to the person we have a problem with and that it magically goes away. But that's not the Christian way. The Christian way is to help a person become better, and Jesus gives us the blueprint this week in the Gospel. He explains what to do when your brother sins - first and foremost talking with him, then getting others involved to a greater degree the more they won't listen. But note where he begins - with the person directly. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone." Interesting that "alone" is used isn't it? It's enough to make a Midwesterner squirm. But it's also a way to help find the right path.

And with that in mind, our challenge this week is to put on our big boy or big girl pants, and recognize that dealing with uncomfortable situations is inevitable. But we cannot ignore it. We have to work it out.

I think a starting point is recognizing that we can all have an aversion to confrontation. I know I have. My stomach gets in a knot, or sometimes I try to delay. Especially in our part of the country, there can be a conditioning to avoid conflict. But it could be a family situation too; feeling like we can never say anything to a sibling, or even a parent or adult child. It's good to look at what is causing our aversion. Maybe we fear being the one in the wrong. Or say "who am I to say anything." Or we fear a past mistake we made where a confrontation went wrong. Or fear rejection - thinking like Val did, it's better to say nothing for the sake of the friendship. To just "keep the peace." The problem is though the issue doesn't go away. Had Val said nothing, Tina would have gone on being mean Tina. And when we realize that if we have an aversion, it's not going to suddenly sober up an alcoholic, or cause someone to suddenly see the error of their ways. It means too we can't complain to others about it too as a cop out. That's called "traingling" and it's not a recipe for success in helping live out that spiritual work of mercy

admonishing the sinner. Remember, this isn't about being mean or putting someone down - it's about helping.

With that in mind, some of the things we can do are to first and foremost pray. When we spend time with God, it helps us to gain insight into what to do through the help of the Holy Spirit.

Second, we consult. Seeking counsel is important unless there's an obvious situation where we have to act immediately. I frequently consult with people I trust when I have a situation I have to address, and it helps me to handle it better to get a second, third, or fourth opinion. Note Jesus says that as the situation escalates if the person does not listen to you, bring in others, than the Church. Well, I think we can also bring the Church in right away in the respect not calling up your parish priest and having him be a part of mediation, but knowing what our faith teaches on certain things and why. Once we are informed and know the faith, we can then use that in dealing with a situation that needs to be dealt with as a help.

Third, the part of engaging. When we do this, it's important not to be condescending or demeaning. We talk to our brother or sister in a non-threatening way. Sometimes like the Gospel says we do this alone; other times it's appropriate to have another person with us who is equally concerned about the situation or the person. But during the process, it's important to not just talk over a person, but to listen to what they have to say. It could be we have misunderstood them or the situation. Through this, we show empathy by trying to understand the person better and put ourselves in their shoes. But we also need to have fortitude through this too - sometimes we might feel like it's not going anywhere, or that they are getting angry and we just want to end things quickly. We don't go looking for a fight, but we also say what needs to be said to truly help the person grow.

Fourth, I think it's important to have follow-up too. A person doesn't just change overnight. We need to give someone support and love. Maybe they don't like the message at first, but after time they begin to think about what we said and begin to change. Or maybe that person needs time and patience to change, or needs us to help them become more accountable, or take the first steps. We need to be patient and loving, praying for that person, and also saying to them "I am here for you" and journeying with them as they try to make the life changes needed.

Lastly, let's not forget to look in the mirror too. As I've quoted before, Pope Francis' words to the interviewer when asked who he was were "a sinner." This might shock you, but I am one too. And so are you. We might not want to hear it, but sometime we are Tina. We might be blind to a sin in our life, or some actions that are causing problems in our family or at work. Maybe there is a Valerie who comes in and stands up to us. When that happens, we might be instinctively defensive or angry, but it's important to remember if our goal is sainthood, it requires growth. That is life long. All of us sin, and if our brothers and sisters in Christ truly love us, they may say things to us we don't want to hear but that we need to hear. So let's make sure to listen to them.

Paul says in our second reading to "love one another," and love comes in many forms. On one level, it's acts of kindness and mercy. But on another it's helping one another grow spiritually. Jesus gives us a way of being personally involved in restoring God's community that has been ruptured by sin. It's risky. We risk a lost relationship. Or we risk our ego when we open

ourselves up to criticism. But we have to remember as we come before the altar, we are about to receive Jesus' most awesome love. He gave up his very self to show us the way to be reconciled with God and one another. We pray that we put our grievances aside and long for genuine communion. By admitting our hurts and our wrongs, and helping others to see theirs so they can be reconciled to God and others, together we can truly help one another to receive the most amazing gift of all, a place in the heavenly kingdom earned by learning how to fully respond to God's love.