

If someone has hurt us, the hardest thing to do is to stand in front of them with an open heart. It’s the hardest thing to do, and it’s also the thing that saves us, because in this bold and dangerous choice, Jesus shows up.

When I first started working for a former boss, I noticed that his communication style was a little unusual, but I thought we’d work it out – we’d warm up to each other, better understand what the other meant by things. In some ways, this was true: we *did* develop a kind of shorthand. But not all of his ways of saying things – and especially not all of the things he thought were funny – sat well with me. My boss made comments that I knew to be sexist or homophobic or that poked fun at my faith – but then he’d cap it off with a smile and a wink, as if to say that he knew better and it would never happen again. Until it did.

One day, he and I had a conversation that left me feeling particularly shaken and disoriented. I looked to him for guidance and approval in my work, and instead I found him to belittle me and my choices. In our back and forth, I tried to make sense of what he was saying – I tried to be curious, to better understand his perspective. Every time I asked for clarification, he would squirm into a new justification until I lost sight of my most closely held values. I left that day anxious about going back: how could we ever have a normal conversation again?

The truth is that I don’t know how many times my boss said something inappropriate or uncomfortable – it wasn’t every day, maybe not even every week. But I could tell that it was a pattern, and our brains are meant to look for patterns everywhere. So every time I went to speak with him, I was on edge – always on the lookout for what he would say next, and more importantly, how I would protect myself from his hurtful words. I chose my responses carefully,

agonized over what I wore, and disclosed as little about myself as possible – convinced that if only I did these things right, he wouldn’t get to me. The thing is – he already had.

This Gospel says that if someone sins against you, to go and tell him his fault – just the two of you alone. “If he listens to you,” the Gospel says, “you have gained your brother.”

The way of Jesus is not the best way to win an argument, nor is it the most comfortable, nor is it the path of least resistance. The wisdom of this teaching is to reorient our sense of when disruption happens – not with the confrontation, when one person approaches the other to name his fault, but before that, when one person sins against another. Even though the one who is hurt may not show their pain, the cracks have already started to appear. The bond between these two is starting to break, and the naming of the wrongdoing – though it *stings* – will ultimately transform us.

Throughout this period, I would oscillate between two modes with my boss. One was to simply laugh along with him, and whenever I did this, I felt the person I presented to the outside world being ripped a little further apart from who I know myself to be. Other days, instead of laughing, I would say something like “I don’t think that’s funny” – and he would respond sheepishly, agreeing that he shouldn’t have made that kind of comment. I gave myself credit for standing up to him, but I only ever pointed out one little thing at a time. I tried to tell him, as the Gospel says, how he sinned against me, but I chose a method where I felt like I would stay protected – I couldn’t tell him the extent of how much he had hurt me without risking that I would get hurt again. And just as I was, my boss was protecting himself. When I tried to confront him about his hurtful comments, he would become defensive – because just

like me, he didn't want to open himself up, to peer inside and let himself or anyone else see how he had been hurt, lest it happen again.

Our bodies are meant to stay alive. When we feel danger, our pulses quicken and we become more alert – ready to run or hide or fight back. All of evolutionary history is behind this – which is to say, there is very little we can do about having sweaty palms when someone makes us nervous. But this bodily response is honed for *physical* danger – and it served us just as well in the presence of a woolly mammoth as it does when we swerve out from a speeding car. Our bodies produce this same kind of response when we feel emotionally vulnerable and exposed. These feelings are *real* – your heartrate can confirm that. Some things do produce real danger – even difficult conversations can have tremendous consequences for our physical safety. But other times, difficult conversations are just that – and our bodies only *think* it's a bear chasing after us.

The Gospel says that if you approach your brother, and he does not listen, to bring in a few witnesses. The way of Jesus – the path to transformation – requires that we love ourselves and the other person so much that we will not be able to stand holding onto this hurt all alone. I felt like whenever I tried to approach my boss about his behavior, he would nod politely but change nothing. I worried that a more forceful approach would bring negative consequences. I needed some witnesses. But in order to have the security that comes from community, you need to open yourself up to that support.

After a long, hard week with my job, I was eager to get to church – I needed a glimpse of God's goodness and mercy. In the news that week was yet another prominent case of

workplace sexual harassment. During the prayers, someone blessed that woman’s bravery in coming forward.

I was reminded what’s at stake in *not* being vulnerable: I had kept a part of myself from my church community, and it left me feeling bitter and alone. And yet, in this moment of prayer – when each of us opened ourselves up to God – I felt seen by my family of faith.

I was reminded what’s at stake in *not* being vulnerable: for months I had feared that if I opened up, people would take me less seriously. And yet, hearing one woman’s vulnerability lifted up before God, I felt a connection with someone I had never met and, inspired by her story, I felt ready to tell my own.

I was reminded what’s at stake in *not* being vulnerable: as I closed myself off to others, I lost touch with a sense that I and everyone around me is a beloved child of God. And yet, through joining our voices together in song, a gentle hug from a friend, and a reminder that we are, in fact, beloved children of God – I *knew* that sharing our lives with one another is a great gift.

There is too much at stake in *not* being vulnerable. The way of Jesus – the path to transformation – requires that we love ourselves and the other person *so much* that we will not be able to stand holding onto this hurt all alone.

I wrote a description of the comments my boss made in as much detail as I could remember and I sent it to HR. For months I had agonized that they would not take me seriously, for as much as I *knew* that it was my boss who had wronged me, I *felt* that somewhere along the line I had failed. But in pouring my heart out and pressing “send,” I gained some witnesses. They thanked me for coming forward, and they said they believed me.

Jesus concludes this teaching by saying that when two or three are gathered in his name, he is there among them. The HR reps gathered with me and my boss, and they invited us all to listen openly and share freely. This invitation did not make it any more comfortable for me to be there – it did not make it any easier for me to say how I had been hurt or to hear my boss try to put the blame on me. But the openness that led to that gathering made it clear that there were not just two of us in the room: there were the HR folks – my witnesses! – there too, and they believed me. And also there, right among us, was Jesus – working in all kinds of unseen ways to transform our lives.

If someone has hurt us, the hardest thing to do is to stand in front of them with an open heart. It’s the hardest thing to do, and it’s also the thing that saves us, because in this bold and dangerous choice, Jesus shows up. It’s as easy – and as paralyzingly difficult -- as taking Christ at his word.