I. Introduction

Once there was an elderly woman named Mrs. Gunderson who lived in a big house near the edge of town. The house was run down, because she was too weak to take care of it properly; she tried her best to maintain it, but it was more than she could handle. Mrs. Gunderson was a widow; her husband had died a few years earlier, and her three children were also dead: her two sons had been in the army and had been killed in a war overseas, and her daughter had died of cancer while young. Mrs. Gunderson was all alone—except for her little dog, Bertie. In dog years, Bertie was almost as old as she was; she called him “her little boy,” and she fed him leftovers from her plate and other treats, too. One Saturday morning Bertie was out in the front yard, while Mrs. Gunderson was trying to wash some windows on the front porch. Some boys came along and, before she knew what was happening, they grabbed Bertie, tied a rope around his neck, and dragged him along behind their bicycles. They didn’t mean any harm; it was all in fun, and they brought him back after only one trip around the block. However, the experience was too much for Bertie, and he died of exhaustion a few hours later.

Mrs. Gunderson was heartbroken. She knew the names of the boys—they had been in the catechism class she taught at church until a few years earlier—and she decided to call their parents that afternoon. At first she was going to chew them out and give them a lecture on how to raise children properly, but something made her stop and reconsider. Instead, she called and simply explained what had happened, and asked the parents to send the boys right over to her house. They came a little while later—and were they ever frightened; they were certain Mrs. Gunderson was going to yell at them and threaten them and tell them how terrible they were. To their great surprise, she calmly met them at the door, brought them to the dining room table, and served them hot chocolate and cookies. After the cookies were gone, the elderly woman got out her photo album and showed them pictures of her family and of her dear little dog Bertie. The boys were feeling terribly guilty and ashamed over what they did; they apologized profusely and asked what they could do to make it up. Mrs. Gunderson said, “I know you’re sorry and you won’t do it again. You can’t bring Bertie back, but there is something you can do. I’d be pleased if you’d stop by and eat cookies with me every now and then.” The boys readily agreed, and Mrs. Gunderson thought, “Maybe something good will come of this.”

The following week she went to the Humane Society and found a little dog about Bertie’s size, whom she took home and named Charlie, and he soon helped her overcome her grief over Bertie’s loss. The boys, for their part, kept their promise; they came once a week for cookies and hot chocolate and spent time talking with Mrs. Gunderson and playing with Charlie. Some of them even came more often, and soon they were doing some of the things Mrs. Gunderson could no longer do for herself: mowing the lawn, raking the leaves, trimming the bushes, fixing the fence, painting the garage, and so on. She and the boys became close friends; they started calling her Grandma, and she loved them as if they were her very own (John Sumwalt, Lectionary Stories, p. 101). The moral of this story is simple: angry words and accusations often make things worse. When we correct others with love and respect, however, Jesus is with us.
II. Development

In a perfect world it would never be necessary to correct anyone. That, of course, is not the reality we know; people make mistakes and bad or sinful decisions, and need guidance, discipline, and correction, all the time. The readings we’ve heard today speak of the need to show genuine concern for others. St. Paul tells us, “Owe nothing to anyone except the debt that binds us to love one another.” It’s not a loving thing to witness others harming or destroying themselves through bad moral decisions, and then do or say nothing about it. The Lord told the prophet Ezekiel that a watchman’s role is to warn the wicked of the need to repent—and a failure to give this warning makes the watchman himself accountable for whatever happens. In the Gospel, Jesus is in effect appointing all of us as watchmen or women; when we see a loved one or a member of our community sinning, we’re supposed to invite him or her to repent—not in a harsh or judgmental way, but with a loving and accepting manner, so as to make it as easy as possible for the person to accept correction and change his or her behavior. Even if it becomes necessary to shun someone, the purpose is not to punish that person, but to help him or her realize the seriousness of the situation. Jesus also adds that, no matter what happens, we must continue praying for those who reject the Gospel and ignore our efforts to help them—for when we unite in prayer, Christ is present and great things become possible.

III. Conclusion

Most of us do not like either giving or receiving correction—but both these experiences may be part of our Christian calling from time to time. When it comes to giving correction, it can be helpful to phrase it in a non-threatening manner, saying, for instance, “May I ask a favor of you? Could you please not do this?” or “May I make a suggestion? It might be better if you did it this way instead.” God, after all, prefers not to shout at His people, but to speak softly and lovingly, even when they sin—so it’s good if we can use that approach, too. When it comes to receiving correction, it can be helpful to set aside our pride for the moment and, instead of becoming defensive, embrace the opportunity to practice humility and then honestly consider what the other person has said—for we all have our blind spots, and these hidden weaknesses may continue harming us unless someone lovingly points them out to us.

Jesus was perfectly sinless, yet He remained completely humble. We are far from being sinless, and so we have even more reason to be humble, especially in giving and receiving correction. God will do the judging, not us—but sometimes it’s our duty to assist people in preparing for judgment by helping them recognize and overcome their faults. As Mrs. Gunderson demonstrated, this is best accomplished not by being fierce and self-righteous, but gentle and forgiving. Even with this approach we won’t always be successful, but we will be pleasing to God—and His judgment is ultimately the only one which matters.