

“A Good Start”
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
September 7, 2008 – the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
And Based on Matthew 18:15-20 and Exodus 12:1-14
By the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

A good start is one that prevents a disaster before it happens. In our lesson from the gospel of Matthew, it’s happening. A member of the church has sinned against another member. We’re not told what the sin was. All we know is that it was serious enough to require a response. A tear in the fabric of the community has occurred, and if a remedy is not sought, the community will suffer.

The remedy is for the sinner to confess his sin and, by way of repentance, be forgiven. This is how sin is overcome and relationships are restored. The one who has undermined the ties that bind says “I am sorry; I was wrong. What can I do to restore myself to your good opinion of me? I do not want to lose your faith in me.” And the one who was wronged replies, “I am glad. I do not want to lose you, either. Here is what you need to do so that won’t happen. And, oh, by the way, I forgive you—completely. Welcome back.”

When you see this remedy in action, it’s a beautiful thing. It’s two people realizing justice and mercy. Remember them? They’re the love-hate twins of the Bible. Justice demands judgment; mercy, forgiveness. Justice seeks compensation for the wrong that is done; mercy, help in bearing the cost. They are two distant cousins, if you will, who cannot stand each other—until they meet and kiss, which is what happens in Psalm 85:8-12:

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak;
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
That his glory may dwell in our land.
Mercy and truth will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

When justice and mercy work it out, good things happen. There is *shalom* in the land—harmony and wholeness. When they cannot work it out, you get the situation described in Matthew. On the one side is the hardened, unrepentant

sinner, on the other side, the angry victim. The solution that is proposed—more and more witnesses to certify that the sinner really is hardened and unrepentant and therefore worthy of being kicked out of the community—that is not a remedy, that is a disaster. The hole in the fabric is still there. So are the wounds. There is justice of a kind, but what good is it? Everyone's riled up. The whole church is talking about what happened. There is no peace in the land, there's only bitterness and smoldering anger. And every time the subject is brought up, these wounds fester. Our lesson from the gospel according to Matthew may offer a model for how church order is to be maintained—that is how it is normally preached—but it's a model for a worst case scenario, a disaster.

All of which makes me wonder: is the point of this lesson really practical advice? Was Jesus really enshrining a set of by-laws for handling stubborn mules? I don't think so. The emphasis is entirely elsewhere. It falls on getting the stub-born mules of this world to confess their sin! Jesus was saying, "Look, you want trouble in your church? Then this is what you do: you refuse to confess your sins. Just don't do it. If the evidence piles up against you, deny everything! If they keep bringing more and more witnesses against you, stand firm! It's not your fault. It's theirs! They're the guilty ones; you're blameless—that is what it takes to stir up trouble in the assembly of the...not-so-faithful."

But if you want to stir up righteousness and peace and mercy and truth, then you need to grow *mensch*s. Yes, *mensch*s. *Mensch*s are people who can admit their faults—and not only their faults, their mistakes; and not only their mistakes, their sins. The word is Yiddish for 'human being.' Literally, it means 'man,' as in "C'mon, be a man. Admit you did it." A mensch is someone who can and does clean up the mess he or she has made. I've always thought this is how you know you're an adult. Children, most of them, at any rate, have a hard time owning their messes. Their egos are simply too fragile; they're not yet strong enough to be vul-nerable. So they build up this facade of strength—the "I can do this; I can do and have and become anything I want" boast that we hear so often from childish child-ren and adults—and it serves them well enough, I suppose, when they need to grow. But that's a very short time frame, it seems to me. And I'm not convinced that the cost of building such a facade is ever worth it.

The trick is how to recognize that a mess has been made—real sinning has taken place! Yessiree, pardner; this is a mess!—and, at the same time, find a way out. Justice *and* mercy, in other words.

Here is a story that will help. It concerns a woman and her eight-year-old son, Fred. "One day," she said, "Fred wanted something very badly—I can't recall what—and I said no. He was so furious he began to lash out at me. I told him he was not permitted to hurt me. He began to curse and yell. I told him he was not permitted to curse. He was beside himself with rage. He asked for whatever it was again. Again, I said no. He looked like he would shoot me if there had been a gun. I told him that I knew he felt angry and [then I] asked him if anything could make him feel better. What did he most feel like doing? He said

he would like very much to spit at me.

“I was totally disgusted by this idea,” she went on, “but I had to admit that it was completely honest. He was also now under control and waiting respectfully for permission. Yes, he was tremendously angry, but he was learning that most of the ways he felt like acting were forbidden to him. He was successfully controlling the impulse to indulge in them. [So] I said [yes,] it would be OK, just this time, for him to spit at me. Once.

“He spat. [And] with an elaborate flourish, I wiped my cheek and said, ‘Yuck!’ At that point, we both burst out laughing. It was over” (from *Parenting as a Spiritual Journey: Deepening Ordinary & Extraordinary Events into Sacred Occasions*, by Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996, p. 59).

She did not hide her face from insult and spitting, Isaiah 50:6.

This mother was a mensch. And she modelled what it took for her son to become one, too. It took a forceful recognition of our destructive tendencies and a thoroughgoing refusal to accept them as normal behavior—the justice part. It took keen insight into the emotions that swirl about when we’re on the cusp of clinging to our folly. She knew what it meant to be human. And it took largeness of heart, soul, mind, and strength to find a way out—that’s the mercy part. A mensch knows how to clean up their own mess, and they know how to help others to do the same.

It’s what the world is waiting for. May God grant to us the grace of growing one in our own lives.

Amen.