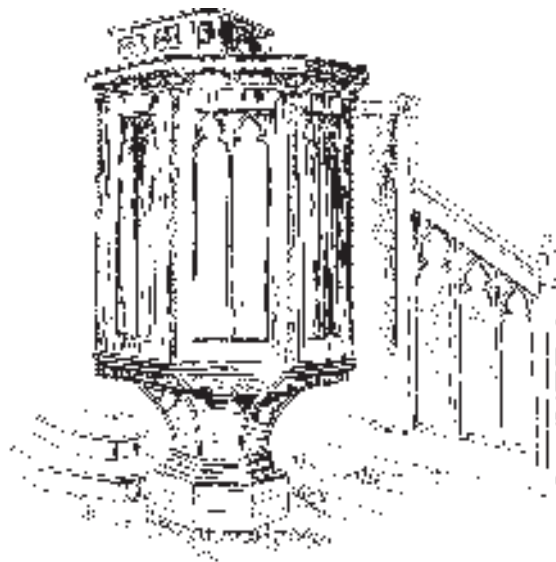


March 7, 2010

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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**Peacemaking:  
The Believer's Calling  
3. The Golden Result**  
by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Matthew 7:1-5

Last week I preached on civility and "The Golden Rule." This week I'd like you to consider "The Golden Result." "The Golden Result" is a corollary to "The Golden Rule." "The Golden Rule" calls us to do to others as we would have them do to us. "The Golden Result" says that people will usually treat us as we treat them. If we blame others for a problem, they will usually blame in return. But if we say, "I was wrong," it is amazing how often the response will be, "It was my fault, too."

I have seen this golden result many times. Whether the dispute involves a personal quarrel, family fight, lawsuit, or church division, people generally treat one another as they are being treated. When one person attacks and accuses, so does the other. And when God moves one person to start getting the log out of his own eye, often other side does the same.

Do you remember the movie titled *The Straight Story*? It is based on a true story. It chronicles the pilgrimage of a 73-year-old man out to mend a broken relationship with his brother, whom he hasn't seen or spoken to in over 10 years.

Alvin Straight lives in Laurens, Iowa. Alvin has lost his driver's license because of impaired vision. A call comes reporting that Lyle, Alvin's estranged brother, has had a stroke. Alvin determines to find a way to visit his brother and make things right. His only solution is to hitch a makeshift trailer to his 1966 John Deere riding lawn mower and set out on a 500-mile- trip that will take him in excess of six weeks. Camping out in fields and backyards made available by hospitable people, Alvin Straight slowly but surely makes his way toward his destination. After crossing the Mississippi River and entering Wisconsin, Alvin camps out in a church cemetery, kindling a campfire between tombstones.

The pastor of the adjoining church sees Alvin from his office, has pity on the "homeless" man, and brings him a plate of hot meat loaf and mashed potatoes. A conversation ensues.

"I can't help but notice your rather unlikely mode of transportation," the pastor says eyeing the riding mower. Alvin makes mention of his brother who lives in the area. The pastor recalls having met a man by that name while making calls in the hospital, but admits that he didn't remember the man saying anything about a brother.

"Neither one of us has had a brother for quite some time," Alvin explained. "Lyle and I grew up as close as brothers could be. We were raised in Moorhead, Minnesota. We worked hard—me and Lyle would make games out of our chores—we used to sleep out in the yard most every summer night. We talked to each other till we went to sleep. It made our trials seem smaller. We pretty much talked each other through growing up."

The pastor asks, "Whatever happened between you two?"

Alvin's eyes tear up as he explains, "The story's as old as Cain and Abel. Anger. Vanity. Mix that together with liquor, and you've got two brothers who haven't spoken in 10 years."

Alvin's manner and voice indicate the depth to which he is grieving and the barrier that exists between him and Lyle. He adds, "Whatever it was that made me and Lyle so mad, it doesn't matter anymore. I want to make peace and sit with him and look up at the stars like we used to do."

Like Alvin, many of us have someone with whom we deeply long to be reconciled. More often than not the thing keeping us from reconciliation is our own self-righteousness. Thankfully, Alvin and Lyle's dispute has a golden result.

Love of money can obviously distract one from the kingdom of heaven, but so, ironically, can love of one's own moral rectitude. We all know moral watchdogs, the faultfinders, those who are ready to point the finger of judgment at others. To this, Jesus says, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (Matt. 7:1).

But what does Jesus mean? Can he mean that literally Christians are never to make moral judgments about the behavior and values of others? Are we never to raise an eyebrow in concern, a voice in protest? If someone is stealing money from the offering plates or selling drugs on the street or spreading vicious rumors in the community, are we to look the other way, throw up our hands, and say, "It's not my business to judge others?"

Absolutely not. In fact, later in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus describes a procedure for the church to follow in confronting wrongdoing (see Matt. 18:15-20). The words "do not judge..." in context are not a prohibition against moral discernment, but an invitation to participate in a process of moral growth.

Many people would love to be moral judges, pointing the finger, demanding change in others. Jesus requires that before we call for the transformation of someone else, we be transformed ourselves. The words, "Do not judge," when we consider the whole passage, become "In the kingdom of heaven, your standards of judgment must be transformed; therefore do not judge until...."

Until what? Following the flow of the passage, the process unfolds this way: If a member of the faith community sees a moral flaw in another person ("the speck in your neighbor's eye," Matt. 7:3) and is tempted to come down on the neighbor in moral judgment, that person is not to do so until engaging in deep self-examination ("take the log out of your own eye," Matt. 7:5). Then, and only then, can the neighbor's wrong be addressed.

Note that this process involves two kinds of transformation. First, finding the wrong in oneself before turning the moral searchlight upon anyone else, causes one to move from self-righteousness to compassion. When we recognize that we, too, are broken and flawed, that we do not stand on unspoiled moral ground, then we move from harsh judgment to a tender concern to help the neighbor ("...you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye," Matt. 7:5). Instead of a finger poked in the neighbor's face, we reach out mercifully to wipe the neighbor's eye.

A grocery store cashier wrote to advice columnist Ann Landers to complain that she had seen people buy birthday cakes and bags of shrimp with their food stamps. People on welfare who treated themselves to such non-necessities were "lazy and wasteful," the writer said.

A few weeks later, Landers' column was devoted entirely to responses to that letter.

One woman wrote, "I didn't buy a cake, but I did buy a big bag of shrimp with food stamps. So what? My husband had been working at a plant for fifteen years when it shut down. The shrimp casserole I made was for our wedding anniversary dinner and lasted three days. Perhaps the grocery clerk who criticized that woman would have a different view of life after walking a mile in my shoes."

Another woman wrote, "I'm the woman who bought the \$17 cake and paid for it with food stamps. I thought the checkout woman in the store would burn a hole through me with her eyes. What she didn't know is the cake was for my little girl's birthday. It will be her last. She has bone cancer and will probably be gone within six to eight months."

Jesus cracks something of a joke when he pictures people concerned about a fly speck in the neighbor's eye, while remaining oblivious to a two-by-four in their own moral vision. Beneath the joke, however, lies a serious point: only when we have stared into the abyss of our own moral failure can we be of genuine strength to others in *their* struggles.

It will not do to say condescendingly to others, "Yes, yes, I feel so much compassion for you in your moral predicament because I've struggled a bit with that myself." Only those who realize the immensity of their own moral struggle, those who have felt the full weight of the "log in their own eye," those who see the truth that they have been fighting a losing battle were it not for the mercy of God, only those people are able to be a true resource to others.

This is a lesson that groups like Alcoholics Anonymous have learned well. Those who are fighting addiction are helped most not by people who scold and judge, but by those who have admitted their own powerlessness, those who confess that the springs of moral refreshment come only from God.

A man went to his doctor in an acute state of anxiety. "Doctor, you have to help me; I'm dying," he said. "Everything I touch hurts. I touch my head and it hurts. I touch my leg and it hurts. I touch my stomach and it hurts. I touch my chest and it hurts. You have to help me, Doc; everything hurts."

The doctor gave him a complete examination. "I have good news and bad news for you," he said. "The good news is you are not dying. The bad news is you have a broken finger."