

Proper 26 (A) – October 30, 2011
Saint Stephen's Church, Wimberley, TX
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Matthew 23:1-12
We Can Be Changed...through Humility!

Inch by inch... once he began to dig into the unfamiliar soil of humility, he began to change inch by inch. The evidence of the slow change occurred during a phone call he made when he heard his scratchy voice plead, "I want to get rid of all of this but I just don't know how!" Those on the other end of the line were even more surprised, for just weeks before the same man had called and promised to bomb their home into ash.

The man on the phone desperately imploring them to help him change was Larry Trapp, the former Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska. The neighbors taking the call were Michael and Julie Weisser. Michael was the newly appointed cantor at the synagogue in Lincoln.

Grand Dragon Trapp, had relentlessly threatened the Weissers ever since they moved into the neighborhood. The things he said were so coarse, so dark, so grisly, and so repugnant that the couple could not believe another human being had such hideous thoughts within him. How could he be so different from them, they thought? Yet going completely against their feelings, Michael and Julie decided not to respond to him defensively or with equal brutality; they decided that every time Trapp called, they would answer with kindness. And then surprisingly they, too, began to change in their feelings for Trapp – but it was slow...inch by inch.

Trapp's ghastly calls did not seem to abate in the face of their actions, but one day he caught Julie alone at home and he began raging at her over the phone line. She quietly listened to his vile rantings and then quietly replied, "Larry, I am going to the store in a few minutes, may I pick you up a few things." Trapp was stunned speechless and hung up after..."Uh, uh, uh...I'm okay." Julie had just planted something within the soil of his soul that could not be uprooted.

It was not many days afterward that Trapp invited Julie and Michael to his home. They were surprised at the appearance of the grimy little apartment. However, they were astonished to see Grand Dragon Trapp completely confined to a wheelchair. For three hours they spoke to Larry about the Holocaust from the Jewish perspective. They noted that Hitler had been twisted inch by inch into a monster. Trapp just listened, and when they got up to leave, he asked them to take his Nazi flags, Klan robes, and all of his white-power paraphernalia. And that day, Larry planted something within the souls of Michael and Julie that could not be uprooted.

What grew from what was planted within the three of them? Well, towards the end of his life, Trapp went increasingly blind. The Weissers invited him to live with them. As for Larry Trapp, he spent those final months in their home begging forgiveness from the many people he had injured.¹ Those are miracles – the miracles of humility. Humility will slowly change us inch by inch.

For those of us who have long considered humility a bad word connected with thoughts of low self-esteem – think again. A business consultant who coaches CEO's of privately held corporations told me this week: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself but more of the other." Only really BIG people can do that. Besides, humility is not so much thoughts as action – action that changes the other person and you. The results are slow, but steady, occurring inch by inch.

Listen to what Jesus says to his disciples and the crowds thronging around him:

*The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore do what whatever they tell you; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them...So remember, all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. **Matthew 23:1-4, 12***

By all means, says Jesus, listen to what the religious leaders have to *say* about the Law that God entrusted to Moses – they have studied it top to bottom – and you need to hear it, digest it, and follow it. But do not emulate them because they are hollow men – unreceptive and unchanged.

All this makes sense when we realize that humility comes from the Latin word "humus", which mean fertile ground. We must become fertile, receptive ground so that Christ can implant his unique will into each one of us. Christ will do that through the Scripture, for all of it from Genesis to Revelation testifies about him. So we must humbly make room for the Word. Christ speaks to us continuously through the Holy Spirit, but we must move over and make room for the Spirit's message. Also, Christ speaks to us through others – and often through those so very different from ourselves. Beware when someone incessantly "drives you up a wall", for they may be your personal prophet sent from Christ!

Furthermore, Christ's will is not just delivered to us personally, but to our community, as well. By now you know we will dedicate a playground at Garza Trailer Park next Sunday afternoon – hardly a headliner event in the nation. Nevertheless, with all the discussions nationally and

¹ Adam Hamilton, Making Love Last a Lifetime (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 78 (Also references from The Jewish Daily Forward, August 19, 2009).

locally about immigration – who’s in and who’s out – it was a brave step to raise the money and build the playground. Garza is surely full of residents who are both legally and illegally in our country. In the end, you decided that the national discord should not be visited on the children.

Those who built the playground reported that the children from Garza surrounded them all through the many hours of tedious work. As they neared completion, and the workers needed only to tighten a few bolts on the slide with a wrench and add a few screws on the playhouse with the drill, they said the children crept ever closer to the swings, the slide, the playhouse. Inch by inch they came. Certainly, they were eager to play, yet also they had slowly realized that they were loved by those so very different from them. And inch by inch the builders began to love the little Mexican children whose names they did not even know. That’s what’s grown in the soil of God’s humility.