

Sunday, September 4, 2011
Eleventh Sunday after Trinity (Proper 18)
Grace Church, Elmira
The Rev'd Fr. Donald W. Matthews+

In the Name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Nobody likes discipline. The author Sue Monk Kidd, in her novel, *The Mermaid Chair*, describes this poignant realization through the thought processes of a monk as he does penance in the lowliest of all positions — flat on the ground She writes:

“Brother Thomas lay prostrate on the floor of the church with his arms stretched out on either side in the shape of the cross, punishment for the things he’d written in the small, leather-bound notebook. Father Sebastian, the prior at the monastery, had found it on the counter inside the abbey gift shop, where he’d left it It was February, Ash Wednesday, and the floor felt cold, even a little damp, through his black robe. He lay in the aisle between the choir stalls and listened as the monks sang evening prayer The floor of the church smelled of Murphy’s oil soap and something else sour and slightly manure-ish that he realized was a mixture of pluff mud from the marsh and fertilizer from the garden. It was clogged and hardened into microscopic crevices in the wooden boards, having been tracked in on the monks’ shoes for the last fifty years.

“Here in this rarefied place — where they all imagined themselves marinating in holiness through their ceaseless rounds of chanting and prayer — was all this hidden mud and cow [dung]. It was hard to overestimate how much this pleased him. Brother Thomas had dreamed once about Christ’s feet — not his crucifixion or his resurrection or his sacred heart *but his feet*. The scent emanating from the church floor, even God’s feet in his dream, made him think more highly of religion some how. The other monks . . . would have impugned the buildup in the floor crevices as profane, but Thomas lay there knowing suddenly that what he smelled was a fine patina of the most inviolate beauty, and shockingly holy. *He was smelling the earth*”

As an accomplished writer of fiction, Sue Monk Kidd knows that in order to strive to show us the sublime, she must start at ground-level — literally — and build from there. And so Brother Thomas’ realization is as good a place as any to face facts. We all come from the same clay — we’re all redeemed by the same Lord. So who has the right to decide that another, a brother or sister, is *wrong*? From where does such authority come? And how is it to be exercised in practical situations?

In our Gospel today, a Christian community is presupposed when Jesus lays out the process of how disputes are to be resolved between believers. In other words, Jesus does not see this as a congregation of individuals living out a “God and me” insular kind of faith, but rather it is more of an *ekklesia*, the church, a communal sort of belief and practice. Our Lord truly assumes an awareness of committed persons living an organic, Spirit-infused reality as His living

Body, carrying on His own life and mission in the world.

As the entire New Testament, and especially the writings of Blessed Saint Paul attest, the Christian community was not absent of challenges. Judging from previous issues even in the Gospels, such as “Who is the greatest?” and even the Parable of the Just Rewards, the community of the faithful is really never made up of self-contained, pious big-shots who have the world by the tail and regard lesser members as deficient. Rather, this community is composed of “children” and “lost sheep.” We are the “little ones” Jesus speaks of — the ones who have little room to boast of anything to each other, and therefore every reason to identify with each other and share each others lives. In other words, as Brother Thomas so well discovered lying on that floor, we not only smell of the earth, we ARE the earth.

But, in the end, doesn't that make it even harder to admit our faults one to another , and even practice forgiveness?

Clearly the community had a lot to learn. The scenario described in the Gospel this morning is probably not about misplacing a corporal for a purifactor by a member of the Altar Guild and getting corrected by the Directress of the Guild. I believe that what is being described is a much more of a basic affront to another's being — an alienation that has violated the “law of love” Christ has given. Thus a way to deal with the problem that is patterned after procedures known to synagogues of the time is offered. It is based on an honest expectation of good will between the offended and the offender. Honest disclosure is fully expected to lead to reconciliation in the name of Jesus the Reconciler. However, rarely does the community mirror that perfect Example — rarely to any of us mirror that example perfectly, but that should not stop us from trying.

Another story comes to mind In her book, *The Irrational Season*, Madeleine L'Engle wrote of a more challenging time when it was difficult for her to feel the unity and accord to which God calls us in the Church — and when the Sacrament itself was outwardly used to promote disunity. She described a friend she once had — a far more regular churchgoer than she was at the time — who faithfully went to receive the Eucharist every morning. Yet when a priest celebrated the Eucharist one morning whom he did not like, he refused to receive the Sacrament itself. She wrote this:

“He does not know what he is doing. He does not know,” she thought, being as charitable as she could. “Surely within me there is an equal blindness, something that I do not recognize in myself, that I can justify without even realizing it. All right, brother. Let us be forgiven together then. I will hold out my hands for both of us today, and you do for me tomorrow morning when I will be asleep while you trudge through the dirty street to the church. It is all right for me to be outraged by what you are doing here in the presence of God, as long as it does not set me apart from you.”

“It was heavy,” L'Engle recalled, “for a while there. I put on several hundred pounds in a few minutes, and now they are gone, at least for awhile. My spiritual scales fluctuate wildly. They are always on the heavy side, but there are days when I am able to travel light, and those days show me the way.”

To me, this story of Madeleine L'Engle's is a direct reflection of what our Lord is saying in today's Gospel. Let's stop portraying the church as a place for saints. We're all sinners and very imperfect ones at that. Why can't we operate as if Saint Paul were right in saying that in his weakness he is strong? Every parish is a place where sinners operate and probably do the best they can with their weaknesses, which inevitably lead to the very human emotions and situations that cause unease, discomfort, and sometimes even divisions. But that's precisely why we need a Savior and His mighty grace in the first place, isn't it?