

Kindness and Disorder
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But Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. (Genesis 9:23)

This story from Genesis 9 of a father's disorderly state and his three son's responses is powerful image of the different reactions we can have when we see someone speaking or acting inappropriately or when something that isn't the way we believe it should be. In sports a referee may blow a whistle, indicate who has committed a foul and announce the consequence of the foul. In extreme situations a player may be ejected from the game for the offense. Most of us understand that the game wouldn't work if there weren't referees. But what is our role at home, at work or in social situations when we see something we think is wrong?

It can happen that a religious community defines itself by its ability to have high standards that are enforced through social sanctions, shunning or gossip. People who are judged to be behaving in disorderly ways receive disapproval in numerous forms. At times this can seem like a healthy support of civil, moral and spiritual order.

In the explanation of the deeper meaning of this story we are given a strong indication that there can be a fundamental evil underlying this quality of condemning judgment. As contained in the final lesson today we are taught:

[Ham] saw his father's nakedness' means that he noticed the errors and perversities . . . Here Ham's noticing his father's nakedness, that is, his errors and perversities, describes people with whom faith is separated from charity. Such people see nothing else but errors and perversities residing with a person. (*Arcana Caelestia* 1079:1)

The ability to be critical of others can come from a hellish state of mind. It also doesn't require much from a person's thinking as reflected in this passage:

It is amazing but true that it is easy for any of us to rebuke someone else who is intending to do something evil and say, "Don't do that-that's a sin!" And yet it is difficult for us to say the same thing to ourselves. The reason is that saying it to ourselves requires a movement of the will, but saying it to someone else requires only a low level of thought based on things we have heard. (*True Christianity/True Christian Religion* 535:1)

The modern tendency toward relativism is disposed to view everything as a matter of personal opinion with no fundamental standards of right and wrong. Relativism would perhaps have Noah's sons observe that if their father chose to do what he did it was his business and none of theirs. In contrast to this relativism, the teachings of the New Church are clear that there is a place for civil and moral judgment.

The Lord says, "Judge not, that you be not condemned" (Matthew 7:1). This cannot in the least mean judging of someone's moral and civil life in the world, but judging of someone's spiritual and heavenly life. Who does not see that if people were not allowed to judge of the moral life of those dwelling with them in the world, society would

collapse? What would become of society if there were no public courts of law, and if no one was permitted to have his judgment of another? But to judge what the inner mind or soul is like within, thus what a person's spiritual state is and so his fate after death - of this one is not permitted to judge, because it is known to the Lord alone. (*Conjugal Love* 523)

In the story from Genesis, Noah's drunken state means people with new ideas about what is genuine true and good that they only partially understand. Because of the clumsy way they think about them and make decisions from these new ideas, they inevitably end up making mistakes (see *Arcana Caelestia* 1068-1074).

Noah's son, Ham, observed his father's drunken and uncovered state and judged it to be disorderly. He told his brothers. They, in contrast didn't just shrug and do nothing. They also acknowledged that their father was drunk and lying naked. Their acknowledgment of this state was quite different from their brother's. As the text for today's sermon states:

But Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. (Genesis 9:23)

Specifically, the garment they used to cover their father means "that they placed a good interpretation on [what had happened] (*Arcana Caelestia* 1084). That it was placed on their shoulders "means that they did so with all the power they had, that is to say, they placed a good interpretation on it and excused it" (*Arcana Caelestia* 1085).

In the internal sense of this story Ham's response to seeing Noah's disorder is an image of people who don't care about what is kind and useful but instead focus on other people's faults and flaws, broadcasting them to others. Shem and Japheth's actions represent a person who does care about living a life of wise kindness. Such people "notice the good things [in other people's lives], and if they do see evil things and falsities they excuse them, and if possible endeavor with that person to correct them" (*Arcana Caelestia* 1079:1).

Note this last observation: "and if possible endeavor with that person to correct them." This is perhaps one of the most challenging parts of wise kindness. It involves several judgments that are not always easy. The first is the introductory observation "if possible." Picture yourself in a grocery store and you observe what you see to be destructive parenting behavior in another shopper. If you are a complete stranger to that parent there are very limited constructive options that you have to be an influence for good in helping that parent recognize the almost inevitable negative consequences of his or her parenting. Even if you saw something of this kind of poor parenting in someone you knew well helping another person develop more effective parenting behavior can be a large challenge. It is quite likely that the person grew up with one or both of his or her parents behaving similarly. Also just conveying that their current parenting is flawed may take away the one tool they currently have. You don't want them to throw up their hands and sink into inactivity with the justification "Obviously I'm just not good at this."

If you do observe a pattern of thought, speech or behavior in another person that strikes you as flawed sometimes the best way to help that person is live your life in the most constructive way

you can. The model of your life can convey far more than a few sentences are ever able to convey.

You can also pray for times when the other person might be most receptive to a new idea. Few of us respond positively to confronting new ideas when they come to us apparently out of the blue. And certainly communication patterns that are perceived as nagging can even have person more entrenched in their previous habits. But there are times when nearly all of us get to a point that we recognize that something really isn't working well in our lives. In that state there can be a humility that has us more open to new ideas. You can look for an opportunity with a friend or relation in which that person is asking for help. Even then pouncing on the moment with a stream of advice can turn the person's state of mind from a willingness to listen to being a closed door.

Part of humility with each of us can be the realization that Lord, with His infinite love and wisdom has been working within that person's life to bring about healthy change. He assures us "Behold I stand at the door and knock" (Revelation 3:20). He is ever working to draw our attention to what is and isn't going well in our motivations, thoughts, words and deeds. In the teachings for the New Church the concept of gradual change or "bending" is part of the Lord's guidance of our lives as the final line of the third lesson states He "bends everything evil into good." We are told "The Lord leads everyone through the agency of his affections and in so doing bends him by means of a Providence working silently; for He leads people by means of their freedom" (*Arcana Caelestia* 4364:2). Another passage states: "The Lord in no way destroys the basic attitudes or principles a person acquires from early childhood, but bends or modifies them" (*Arcana Caelestia* 1255). And yet another.

It is our freedom into which the Lord operates, and by which He bends us. For all freedom involves that which is present in our love or affection, and so in our will. If we do not receive good [loves] and true ideas in freedom it cannot be made or become our own, since something that strikes us as compulsory is not our own but belongs to whoever compels it. For we are not acting of ourselves even though the action is done by us. (*Arcana Caelestia* 4031:4)

Hopefully the idea that the Lord is working with each person can help us to recognize that perhaps we need to be no more than a small part of the process. If we see something that really could be better or more useful, what is the best role we can have to be helpful? Sometimes this can be very gentle, but it isn't always. When we look at the example the Lord gives us in the Gospels, sometimes He was very clear and apparently filled with zeal in pointing out what was wrong or destructive. Sometimes a clear, strong message can help wake a person up to an aspect of life that has been ignored.

Being wisely kind is something that takes work. No one begins adult life being good at it. For some of us impatience and destructive judgment like that represented by Ham is too near the front of our mind. For others of us the motivation to avoid confrontation and fear of evoking a negative reaction in others keeps us from saying or doing anything even when we recognize there is a serious problem before us. And still others hardly pay attention to anything beyond themselves.

Each of us have our own spiritual battles to fight and we have the capability of greater insight on our own battles than we can have for the lives of others. Even as we are seeking the Lord's help

to fight our own faults and flaws we can also seek to serve the Lord in how we interact with others. Particularly the people with whom we have a developed relationship, if we are going to be wisely kind we can ask the Lord for the insight in how best to be a useful part of their lives. May we continue to grow in our ability to be an influence for good in this world. AMEN.

Lessons: II Kings 8:22-23, 27-36, Luke 11:1-13, *Arcana Caelestia* 2535

Genesis 9:18-27

¹⁸ Now the sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And Ham *was* the father of Canaan. ¹⁹ These three *were* the sons of Noah, and from these the whole earth was populated. ²⁰ And Noah began *to be* a farmer, and he planted a vineyard. ²¹ Then he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent. ²² And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. ²³ But Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid *it* on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces *were* turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. ²⁴ So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him. ²⁵ Then he said: "Cursed *be* Canaan; A servant of servants He shall be to his brethren." ²⁶ And he said: "Blessed *be* the LORD, The God of Shem, And may Canaan be his servant. ²⁷ May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem; And may Canaan be his servant."

Matthew 5:43-48

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, '*You shall love your neighbor* and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more *than others*? Do not even the tax collectors do so? ⁴⁸ Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

***Arcana Caelestia* 1079:1-2**

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Where charity does not exist self-love is present and consequently hatred towards all who do not show favor to self. As a result they see in the neighbor nothing except his evil. Or if they do see anything good they either perceive it as nothing or else place a bad interpretation on it. It is altogether otherwise with those with whom charity is present. And from such presence or absence of charity these two kinds of people are distinguished from each other. Especially when they enter the next life, with those who have no charity, a feeling of hatred is manifest in every single thing; they wish to try everyone and indeed to pass judgement on them. Their one desire is to discover what is evil in them, all the time having it in mind to condemn, punish, and torment. But those who have charity hardly notice the evil in another person, but instead notice all the good qualities and true ideas that other people have; and on their evil tendencies and false ideas they place a good interpretation. Of such a nature are all angels, it being something they have from the Lord, who bends everything evil into good.