

## **LITTLE IRON BEDS**

*Sermon by Kenneth B. Wentzel  
First Parish Church  
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There is an ancient Greek myth about a famous bandit named Procrustes, who lay in ambush along a certain road in Attica. Procrustes was an unusually fiendish rogue who included in his professional equipment an iron bed.

His primary activity was to place each of his victims upon this iron bed. If the victims were too long to fit the bed, as the vast majority were, the bandit cut off as much of their legs as was necessary to make the victims fit. If the travellers were too short, Procrustes would place them on a rack and stretch them till they had reached the length of the bed. This mythological rascal derived a great deal of satisfaction from his devilish practice. He felt that all of the travelers were much better off inasmuch as they were all the same length.

According the story, a young warrior named Theseus set out to conquer this monster, much against the admonitions of his wise grandfather Pandion. But Theseus was confident of victory, and victory was his. After a long struggle, he killed Procrustes. But he did not finish the job. Though he killed the bandit, he left the iron bed in tact. As a result , the story tells us, there are many little iron beds in the world to this very day, iron beds into which their owners try to fit everyone else.

And the story suggests that each of us owns one of those little iron beds, and that we use it regularly in a variety of ways. All of us have a tendency to think that we are just a little but more right than others, and that, if they conformed just a bit more to our

standards, they would be truly remarkable and agreeable persons. So we set out to change them, to make them fit our pattern for them, to help them meet our expectations.

It is easy for us to see the cruelty of Procrustes: he judged everybody by himself. It is NOT so easy to see the same error in our own lives. We are in good company, however. The early Christians had enough Procrustean self-righteousness in them to lead Paul to write to the Romans that they should stop thinking more highly of themselves than they ought to think. For judging people by our own standards makes it easier to overlook our own limitations. It's the familiar game of calling attention to someone else's mistakes so that our own flaws won't be noticed. Jesus called the religious brass of his day, the Pharisees and the scribes, on this tactic. He said they were so busy looking for a splinter in somebody else's eye that they failed to see the log that was in their own eye, which was obvious to everyone except themselves.

There is an ancient story about the Greek artist Appelles, who was putting his paintings on exhibition. And he hid behind a curtain where he could hear the comments of those who looked at them. A shoemaker studied the canvasses thoughtfully and remarked that the artist had made a mistake in the way he had painted a shoe. Appelles decided that a cobbler was a better judge of shoes than a painter was, so that night he corrected the error. Later, the cobbler came by again and he was so pleased and flattered that his comment had been noted that he made some unfavorable comments on another aspect of the picture. This time Appelles knew the man was talking in conceited ignorance. He rushed from behind the curtain and exclaimed, "Cobbler, stick to your last!" As mottos go, this one isn't so bad, because arrogance blinds us to our own limitations.

Worse, even, is the fact that judging others by ourselves blinds us to the good that is in them. Thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, and feeling more virtuous, we would have others become perfect, too. Jesus speaks of the meticulous removal of the tiny speck of imperfection that is in the other fellow's eye.

A man from my first parish in Indiana once told me of his boyhood experiences working in the potato fields at harvest time. Out in the fields at 5:30 in the morning, the workers pursued a maddening schedule in the August sun. They dug potatoes, filled their baskets, and emptied them into the big sacks which stood in rows across the fields. The heavy bags were then loaded onto slowly moving wagons before the supper hour. Then to supper, a bath in a bucket, and to bed. All this labor under the broiling sun brought the worker 50c a day.

However, the worst feature of the job was an old man who walked behind the diggers with a cane, poking into dead weeds and into the sides of the furrows. When he found a little obscure potato he would shout, "Look at this one you missed! You've got to be more careful!" Seemingly, he was never aware of those rows of bagged potatoes that the workers had dug. He was only concerned literally with small potatoes. Judging others by ourselves blinds us to the good that is in them.

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote: "Most of us seem to think that it is our bounden duty to make people good; but it is not. It is our sublime privilege to make them happy. If they are happy, they will be good, and we shall be pleased with them.

Frank Laubach, noted Christian missionary of an earlier generation, laid out what he believed should be the strategy of the missionary. He said, "Find out what a person needs and give it to him. Find out what a person is proud of and praise him for it."

Well, Procrustes thought he was making people happy by making them fit a pattern. But his victims were anything but happy. We can never make people happy by reminding them that they don't measure up.

One of the great disillusionments in marriage is the discovery, usually early in the game, that one's spouse does not measure up to one's preconceived notions of what a spouse ought to be. It's a miserable life for spouses who persist in trying to make each other over into what every good wife and every good and successful husband should be.

Another major disillusionment is one which comes to church members. It is the disillusionment which follows the discovery that the members are not what church members ought to be. And thus the temptation to drop out "because there are too many hypocrites down there." To which one might justly respond, "If they were all perfect, you wouldn't be able to join."

But how often we confuse the ideal with the possible, or even the probable. Jesus's ethics are the ideal for his followers. St. Paul's description of the church as the harmonious body of Christ is an ideal. And you'll never find the truly perfect church, just as you will never find the truly perfect marriage. For the church involves people. And marriage involves people. And people have little iron beds. We are all vulnerable to the sin of pride, of thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to. And we are all vulnerable to threats to our self-esteem.

Pascal, perhaps in a pique of hyperbole, said, "If all men knew what each said of the other, there would not be four friends in the world."

Jesus was right: we have to get rid of the log in our own eye. But how? We can't do it for ourselves; the log is too big. Besides if we could do it ourselves, we would

be even more perfect than we are now, and even more difficult to live with. As one wag has put it: “The self-made man is a good example of the horrors of unskilled labor.” We simply cannot get that log out of our eye all by ourselves. We need help.

Obviously, altering our judgmental bent and building meaningful relationships with others is no simple matter. Much of what Paul called self-righteousness stems from complex personality quirks that have their origins in early behavior and experience. A good counselor is prepared to help us deal with things like the need to control and the sense of insecurity and the like.

But there is another level at which we can begin to find a way to get rid of those little iron beds of ours, another way to get rid of the log that is in our eye, another way that can actually take us into the very presence of God. St. Augustine said that whenever somebody praised him, he sought out a good friend, sat him down, and asked him frankly to point out his faults. Well, something approaching that kind of relationship is what it takes to become less judgmental. What is so beneficial about such a friendship is not only the humbling reminder of our human frailty, but the joy of nonetheless being accepted by one who knows us thoroughly.

Good people, I strongly believe that having friendships, in which you are recognized for your strengths and for your weaknesses, and are appreciated for the unique human being that you are, is essentially what the church has referred to as experiencing Christ. Joseph Pintauro put it this way: “To believe in God is to have somebody who knows you through and through and likes you still and all.”

St. John believed that. Remember what he wrote in his first letter, something to the effect that no one has ever seen God...but if we love one another, God is in that relationship

because God is love. Think of that! Mull it over! Let the idea seep into your marrow. In every loving, caring, accepting relationship, we are not close to God, we are in God. God gets expressed through us. That notion just blows me away!

So all of a sudden we find ourselves dealing with far more than how to think less highly of ourselves than we ought to think. We find ourselves, rather, in the very presence of God.

What it takes then to become less judgmental and more accepting is not more intellectual brilliance, not harder work, not more self-sufficiency, not a higher morality, not more piety, as highly desirable as all these qualities may be...but a new openness to be looked at by other eyes, and a new willingness to be accepted by other hearts. Literally, everything can change for us when we are brought face to face in loving relationships with others, whose acceptance of us is like the very presence of God who, knowing us for what we are, still like us through and through.