

The House at Pooh Corner, in addition to being the title of author A. A. Milne's second collection of stories about Winnie the Pooh, is the name of our daughter Augusta's Pre-School after we moved to Houston in 2000. It was the best school she ever attended. At the somewhat snobby independent school where I taught Freshman English, many of whose students had attended Pooh Corner, the Headmaster once admitted to me, "After Pooh Corner, it's all downhill." He was only half-joking. Every teacher was kind, every child was charming, and every parent was eager to contribute their all for the children's education in every possible way. Some hosted birthday parties to which every child was always invited. Others served as assistants to the teachers. Still others led the children in outdoor activities and age-appropriate sports. I remember one father named Andy who volunteered to be the children's T-ball coach. I didn't ever really get to talk with Andy, but I appreciated the energy he showed while teaching our little ones how to swing the bat or catch the ball. I did not know what he did for work—all I heard from parental chatter was that Andy was some kind of big deal in the energy industry, about which I knew very little.

Imagine our surprise on Halloween morning of 2002 when we saw our daughter's T-Ball coach on the front page of the Houston Chronicle. It turns out that Coach Andy was Andy Fastow, the former Chief Financial Officer for the recently bankrupted energy trading company Enron—once the seventh largest company in America. Coach Andy had been indicted by a federal grand jury with 78 counts of fraud. He used off-the-books partnerships to hide billions of dollars in losses and debt which distorted the company's performance and inflated its share price. Enron Chairman Ken Lay and Chief Executive Officer Jeffrey Skilling were also indicted but with additional and more serious charges. The River Oaks community, which was centered around the House at Pooh Corner—socially, as well as geographically—was shocked. All three men were highly respected and had every appearance and reputation of being good men and pillars of the community; they had been generous to every kind of

non-profit in the Houston area. Skilling had personally donated the awning that sheltered Pooh Corner's drop-off and pick-up area. But as shocked as River Oaks was, the leaders of the city's energy and accounting corporations were shaken to their core. Just two years before, *CFO Magazine* named Fastow CFO of the year for his groundbreaking work in helping Enron amass huge amounts of capital without diluting its stock price or deteriorating its credit quality. In the financial world of Houston, he was treated like a rock star—a hero.

In 2004, Fastow pled guilty to two counts of conspiracy to commit securities and wire fraud. In 2006, he was sentenced to six years in prison and two years of probation. Released in 2011, he now is on a public speaking circuit in which he talks to business students, fraud examiners, and other finance and accounting professionals about the difference between following the rules and following larger principles. He points out that everything he did was scrutinized and approved by Enron's accountants, senior management, Board of Directors, attorneys, or their external auditors. "I thought I was doing the right thing," he says. "I thought I was a hero. I found every way I could to technically comply with the rules." But he confesses that he failed to follow deeper principles. Accepting full responsibility for his actions, he says, "I now believe what I did was wrong, unethical, and illegal. And it caused harm to people. For that, I deserved to go to prison." At the conclusion of every speaking engagement, Fastow lifts in one hand the elegant, colored glass trophy he received when he was named CFO of the Year in 2000. In the other, he holds up the plastic prison card he received in 2006. And then he says, "I got both of these things for doing the same deals." In addition to teaching our daughter T-Ball, Andy Fastow teaches us that it is possible to follow the rulebook but still fail to do the right thing.

Today's Gospel reading, which is complicated and requires some unpacking, is fundamentally about the choices we constantly make between trying to follow certain rules, whether coming from God or from other people, or accepting the deeper and even

fundamental principle of God’s mercy, love, and grace. But first, and it will just take a couple of minutes, let’s unpack a couple of things.

Today we heard Jesus say, “If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck, and you were thrown into the sea.” When we hear Him talk about “little ones,” we might think that He is talking about children, which in Greek is *paidon*. In fact, the Greek word for “little” He uses is *mikros*, as in microscope. It’s the same word He uses when He talks about our needing faith even as small as a little *mikroteros* mustard seed, about our being his *mikron* little flock, about how the littlest *mikroteros* believer in the Kingdom is greater even than John the Baptizer. So, the word *mikros* is not limited to children; it simply means something tiny but precious. The Greek word He uses for “to sin” is *skandalizo*, as in to scandalize; literally, *skandalizo* means to stumble, trip over, and fall: it is a stumbling block. It’s the word He uses when He rebukes Peter for suggesting that He not suffer and die on the Cross: “You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s (Matthew 16:23). It is the same word that Paul uses when He writes to the Christians in Rome “let no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way (Romans 14:13).” The *mikroteros*—the little ones—before whom we must not put any *skandalizo*—stumbling blocks of any kind—are not just children; they are us. They are us as we relate with each other. We—personally and together—are little, we easily get tripped up, but we are always precious to God.

In Jesus’ time among us in this life, the chief sources of stumbling blocks were the Pharisees, those truly devout Hebrews who taught that we must perfectly follow the perfect Law of God if we are to have any kind of relationship with Him. In this mind-set, life is a desperate game in which our winning or losing outcome depends entirely on our having the capacity and willpower to successfully follow the rules. This is the exact opposite of what

Christ came to show us. As He told Nicodemus, “God did not send the Son [that is, Jesus] into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him (John 3:17).” God knows that we are selfish and broken; He knows that we cannot seem to do anything truly good for long without Him. But instead of threatening us or condemning us with fear and anger, He came among us in total self-giving love to save us from ourselves and to bring us to Himself. His self-giving love is so perfectly permanent that He died on the Cross to put to death all our sins. Further, He rose from the dead to kill Death and to raise us to new life after we die. All we need is to accept and trust what He has done for us. And if it feels too difficult to accept and trust Him, then in prayer we can simply tell Him so and then ask for His grace, which is already constantly around, before, behind, beneath, and above us—always carrying us to Himself.

But still, we hear the chattering, anxious voices of the Pharisees either around us or within us. Constantly we hear that we must try harder, do more, be better. So, in today’s Gospel, Jesus takes those voices to their necessary conclusions through hyperbolic exaggeration. To those who resist grace and insist that for us to be loved by God we must be perfect, Jesus says, as it were, “Fine. If that is your standard for living, if that is the way you insist on defining your relationship with My Father, then if any part of you makes you fail in your quest for self-perfection—even your hand, your foot, or your eye—then you had better cut it off, tear it out, or get rid of it.” If we refuse to surrender our obsession with self-accomplished perfection and leave no room for grace, all we will end up doing is destroying ourselves piece by piece and turning our lives into something that feels like Hell. And it’s all so unnecessary.

According to Tullian Tchividian, the grandson of the legendary evangelist Billy Graham, the most prevalent false teaching about God in American Christianity is what we could call “Jesus plus.” Too many preachers of all kinds in too many pulpits of all kinds say

that while belief in Jesus is all well and good, to be a real Christian you must believe in Jesus “plus” do something else. Jesus “plus” personal moral purity. Jesus “plus” a rigorous religious life of prayer and Bible study. Jesus “plus” a specific stance on a certain moral or cultural argument. Jesus “plus” 100% faith, Biblical or theological orthodoxy, political orientation, marital tranquility, parenting competency, physical fitness, emotional stability, sobriety, or financial peace. Don’t get me wrong—these are good and important things. God wants us to enjoy all of them. Every one of them leads to a more sane and enjoyable experience of life. But none of these is a precondition for the total love that God always had, always has, and always will have for us. Furthermore, the deficiency or even lack of any or even all of them does not make God angry with us, is disappointed in us, or like us even a little bit less. The “plus” in a “Jesus plus” theology inevitably becomes a distraction from Jesus Himself; it is exactly the stumbling block that trips us up and, when we fall, leads us to despair about our helplessness, to distrust that God is with us even in our failings, and, ultimately, to wrath at God for our failure to do what no one can do without Him. Failure is the Emergency Room that leads us into the hospital that the Church is and is supposed to be. Often, it is only when we have failed and feel lost in the bottom of a dark pit that we finally discover that God has loved us all along. It is especially at these times that He gives us His grace to turn to Him. As the Episcopal priest John Zahl has said, “God’s office is at the end of your rope.” Christ came among us not to murder us with rules but to save us with the eternal, unchanging, First Principle of His grace. Everything minus Jesus equals nothing; nothing plus Jesus equals everything.

St. John the Evangelist was the last surviving Apostle. In his old age he lived in Ephesus, in modern-day Turkey, where he was much beloved. In his community’s worship services he was often asked to sum up the life and message of his Lord and best friend. To his community’s frustration, he never gave any profound insight, prayer technique, or arduous

discipline. Instead, in his sermon, he would always simply say, “My *mikroteros*—my little ones—love one another.” Eventually tiring of this answer, one day the brothers asked him why he always gave the same sermon. He replied, “It is the Lord’s command. And if this alone is done, it is enough.”