

## Montgomery Plan -- Proper 16C

What do we remember about 10<sup>th</sup> Grade? What do we remember about 10<sup>th</sup> Grade that we are willing to discuss in a group? Although it may not be on the latter list, today we will be taking up geometry. Not everyone cheer at once!

Theorems, postulates, rules of geometry... The teacher we had was very colorful indeed. He understood that, if we were to understand and remember the precise things we learned about geometry, we must have precise learning habits. In some abstract, creative, subjective classes, we were allowed, even encouraged to find our own ways forward with the material being considered. Geometry with Gaylord C. Montgomery was not one of these.

Precise learning habits included focus. Simple rule: No other materials than those of a Geometer during Geometry class. The first student in a given year to have other books on her desk watched those books go out the second-storey window. No second student came forth to test Mr. Montgomery's conviction on the subject.

And he was very big and strong too -- wrestling coach and weight-lifter -- so that only one football player had to be bodily removed for backtalk each

semester to establish a higher degree of academic focus there and then, than in any other time and place of our restless teenage years. I hasten to add, he did not defenestrate the recalcitrant scholar-athlete. Rather the entire formica-and-steel chair/desk unit, still containing the hefty linebacker/fullback was lifted and dropped into the wide hallway outside the classroom, for all to see. Then he locked the door so the guy couldn't even think about trying to come back in. Need I add: this is not a biographical anecdote?

The minute the bell rang, he would lock the door. Little excuse slips would sometimes come pitifully slivering over the threshold, but he never looked at them. Let's face it, these were good methods. In English, it was important to be thoughtful, so if you were late, maybe we should all talk about it. Or not. But in Geometry, it's important to be precise, and we got that right away from his draconian means.

Theorems, postulates, rules of geometry... like Reflection Symmetry: when a shape or pattern is reflected in a line of symmetry. It is a mirror line – like when we look in a mirror, because the reflected shape will be exactly the same as the original, the same distance from the mirror line and the same size. So, when I look in the mirror and I feel differently from how I look, in whatever way – assuming I'm not in a carnival

fun house -- it is not the mirror's fault. It is said that humankind is made in the image and likeness of God. This is not Reflection Symmetry; we aren't just like God. This is intention on God's part. This is hope. This is love. This sometimes looks like wishful thinking, but it is not geometry, because God knows it is anything but precise. Jesus did not blur the line between human and divine, he clarified it.

Here's another logical process, good for geometers as well as for Sherlock Holmes: Deductive Reasoning. If-then statements. In inductive reasoning, reasoning is based on data from earlier events, and experiences that help one project what is. If we instead stick to facts, rules and definitions, it's called deductive reasoning: If p then q.

If we turn off the handle in the shower (p), then the water will stop running (q). We can go on to say: If the water stops running (q) then we don't get wet any more (r). The law of syllogism tells us that if we turn off the water (p) then (r) must be true: we don't get any wetter.

Mr. Montgomery was our Isaiah. Precision. Syllogism. If-then statements. So, if you know the length or the angle of two sides of a triangle, you know all kinds of other stuff. This is called the Pythagorean Theorem, after the stupendous, sixth-century Greek

thinker, politician and holy man, but lots of Egyptians, Babylonians and South Asians had already thought of it too, triangles and all. For example: *All we are like sheep/All sheep go astray/All we go astray.*

My best story about Mr. Montgomery was when I had been unsuccessful in correctly commanding various hand-raising opportunities one class period and finally got one right. Montgomery says, “Good, Symington, you’re back to a Zero for today.” That’s precision.

So from Isaiah in today’s passage we learn, ‘If-Then’ thinking is an operational necessity for the devout: If you cry for help, then God says, ‘Here I am.’ If you enslave no one, then your light shall rise in the darkness. If you stop all pointing of the finger, your gloom will be dispelled like the noonday. If you don’t speak any more evil, the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places too. Offer your food to the hungry, you shall be like a watered garden. Satisfy the needs of the afflicted, you will be a spring of water whose waters never fail. Do all these things, and you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Like Jesus words last week concerning how fully we must commit to these patterns of intentional behavior and policy, Isaiah's language is not so much that of exhortation as of revelation, not so much prescription as description: 'If only you will do these things, then all manner of things will be well. Nobody is saying it will be easy. Jesus' yoke will not be easy, before it's been difficult; the burden does not get light until it has seemed overwhelming. "You have not come to something that can be touched, this is a blazing fire and a tempest. It is the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words sometimes make us beg that not another word be spoken."

Jesus' description of what we will be doing with our lives if we are reflecting God is challenging, to say the least. Just as in Mr. Montgomery's class, the intention must be precise, even if on some days we only get back to zero. And that goes for all of life, not just geometry. At that school, lo this half-century later, there is an organization devoted entirely to motivating fellow to become engaged volunteers in their community, and it is one of the most active clubs on campus. It's called The Montgomery Plan, and they're all out in the community, repairing breaches, making their streets livable again.