

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
September 18, 2016
Heritage Sunday

“A Better Look Out”

**“... the children of this world
are in their generation
wiser than the children of light.”**
(Luke 16:8b; King James Version)

**“The people of this world look out for themselves
better than the people who belong to the light.”**
(Luke 16:8b; Cont. English Version)

Prelude

Our lesson this morning features a rather strange parable that includes an unexpected, perplexing twist, not so much I think in its teaching, but rather in its telling.

Let's direct our attention to the second half of verse 8 in the 16th chapter of Luke. The New Revised Standard Version translates this passage as follows:

“... the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”

Shrewd - there's a term that gives pause; not that it is always cast in a negative light; it does put one on alert; it is a term that bespeaks caution. Beware.

There's an ancient proverb that speaks:
**“Open not thine heart to every one;
lest they requite thee with a shrewd turn”**
(Ecclesiasticus 8:19, Apocrypha, KJV).

I'd like to offer two alternative translations of this verse for our listening ears. The first, from the King James Version of 1611:

"... the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light."

And a second, from the Contemporary English Version (1995) which reads:

"The people of this world look out for themselves better than the people who belong to the light"
(Luke 16:8b; Cont. English Version).

It was this second translation that served as inspiration for the sermon title today:
"A Better Look Out."

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Let's briefly review the parable itself. In the setting Luke provides, Jesus is speaking to his disciples with a parable.

A rich man has an employee on his payroll who is cooking the books and squandering the profits of an enterprise he is charged to keep;

We have as a main character in this parable a "rip-off artist," an embezzler; one skilled at manipulating accounts; it is sophisticated theft, but theft nonetheless, denying the rich man his due.

A whistleblower has apparently exposed the manager. The parable makes clear he will lose his job. But there is a window of sorts, a time lag, between the allegation of impropriety and severance from his service.

We have in the parable a little soliloquy. "What will I do?" ends with "I have decided ..."

Looking out for his future, and not wanting to beg, borrow, or engage in any manual labor, the manager decides to approach a few people indebted to his boss; he balances out their accounts with a payment plan far less than what was actually due: at 50%, 80% of the outstanding obligation.

This is a conspiracy, of course, designed to defraud the rich man; it is a theft mounted upon theft. This isn't a slow drip of ill-gotten gain, but a full faucet of deceit, pilfering the rich man the fullness of his payables.

The twist comes in the parable when the rich man compliments the crook; the criminal is commended for being so astute (see the NEB translation); he actually praises the guy for "**looking ahead**" (Moffat's translation), for looking out and fending for himself.

We are accustomed, I think, to look for the good guys/bad guys in our Bible stories. The good guys we expect to be rewarded. The bad guys we pretty much expect to be punished.

This parable is awkward - at least for me - because it doesn't pit good vs. bad; saint vs. sinner. All the characters are engaged in various degrees of morally hazardous behavior.

We don't have a Good Samaritan to idolize. What we do have is a story that features a smart crook skilled at looking out for himself.

What Jesus does with the parable is challenge disciples to consider: why can't "children of light" be just as wise, just as savvy, as those who look out only for themselves.

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A better look out -
what might this mean for us
on Heritage Sunday?

Permit just a couple of comments.

A history - a personal history;
an institutional history; can be both
a burden and blessing.

We've all heard the expression:
"we've never done it that way before,"
which has often been noted as the
last seven words of a dying church.
This is history with blinders,
heritage as a block, a weight that
crushes novelty, a negation of
any awareness that God is adept
at making all things new.

The blessing of heritage is knowing
where courage has served well;
when "better look outs" emerged.

And there is danger in not knowing
the past from which one has come.

In a recent article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, it was suggested that the next president of the U.S. would benefit from having a **Council of Historical Advisors**, something parallel to, or equivalent with, a Council of Economic Advisors.

A rather startling observation is made in the article with regard to the Middle East, quoting one American diplomat (Dennis Ross):

“from Truman to Obama, almost no administration’s leading figures know the history of what we have done in the Middle East.”

And neither do they know the larger history of the region itself. This means there is an incredible convergence of ignorance and arrogance that has informed and that informs our policy with regard to the nations and states of that region.

One presidential candidate (Gary Johnson) gave vivid illustration to this: when asked what he would do about Aleppo, and the refugee crisis in the Syrian civil war, he responded: **“What is Aleppo?”** He had no knowledge whether Aleppo was person, place, or thing. He knew about Syria, but not the tormented city representing our world in crisis.

Not pick solely on Mr. Johnson, the former Sec. of Defense, Robert Gates, characterized Mr. Trump as being **“woefully ignorant”** and **“stubbornly uninformed”** with regard to world affairs and national security issues (op-ed for the *Wall St. Journal*, 9/16/16).

And just to be fair and balanced, Hilary isn’t as up to speed as she confidently presents herself to be. Hilary supported the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which a Council of Historical Advisors might have suggested would not turn out well.

A better look out is reliant upon
a well informed past;
this is as true for ourselves as it is for our church.
In knowing and appreciating our heritage,
we gain knowledge and access to our future.

A better look emerged when our ancestors
left the great cathedrals.

A better look emerged when our ancestors left land
and country and boarded ships to sail away in search
for a tomorrow better than today. “They knew they
were pilgrims” (William Bradford). Boarding ship, leaving
land to east, sailing west ...

**“They knew they were pilgrims, and looked not
much on those things, but lifted their eyes to the
heavens, their dearest country, and quieted their
spirits.”**

A better look emerged in 1870 when Plymouth Church
was formed from a group of women and men, mostly
women, who sought a different kind of gospel
expression they found lacking in their time and place,
in their own day and age.

A better look has emerged
whenever we have looked to bridge the divides
that exist in the world, rather than bunker down within,
using the walls that surround us here as an escape.

Try as we might, there is always dust that clings;
in a morally hazardous world, we are always in
need of grace, mercy, and forgiveness.
The church is not in possession

of any sanitizer that will keep us unstained
from the world. What we have in our possession
is hope, a trust in forgiveness,
and a prayer for courage to acknowledge
that we always can and should do better.

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A better look out comes of a life
committed to making friends.

Make friends, Jesus advises in this strange
parable and passage of scripture.
Make friends by means of dishonest wealth,
“filthy lucre” in the words of resident
storyteller Stan Holdeman,

It is a simple message that strips the world of its
complexity, doesn't it. Make friends.
'Tis a simple charge, full of daily,
lifelong challenge.

The first pilgrims made a simple division
of people - they considered themselves saints,
and everybody else a stranger. They may not
have been thrilled with all the strangers they
encountered along their way, but they quickly
learned to make peace with strangers. That is a
part of our past that is better outlook.

This reminds me of a quote attributed to
Mark Twain, who was a strong advocate of
travel.

**“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry,
and narrow-mindedness, and many of
our people need it sorely on these accounts.
Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men/women
and things cannot be acquired by vegetating
in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.”**

As Christians we dare not aspire to
vegetate in one little corner of earth
we call our church. That's not a part of
our spiritual DNA. At our best, we have
sought a better look out, a way
fostered by traveling with Jesus;
so I urge:
welcome him as companion, guide,
teacher, and friend. Honor him
with life that looks out to display
a love and trust like that of his own.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*