

BLOWING SUNSHINE

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Lent IV, Sunday, March 6, 2016

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Art Form of TV Commercials

Last Sunday we looked at the story of “The Prodigal Son,” and I showed you on the television a rather classic painting, “The Return of the Lost Son,” by Rembrandt van Rijn.

Today I want to talk, at least to begin with, about a different form of art. Actually it’s not really considered an art form by many people, but I assure you it is, and it is in a category of famous television commercials at the Cannes Film Festival.

One in particular that I want to tell you about comes from 1986. It was an advertisement for a newspaper, *The Guardian*, in Great Britain, and it’s somewhat famous now, consisting of only three black-and white scenes, a total 30-second spot.

First Scene, Car Chases Man. The commercial starts off looking at an intersection. A man is walking one way, and a car emerges from behind a building on the road at this intersection. The man looks at the car, glances over his shoulder, and immediately breaks out in a dead run, sprinting as hard and as fast as he possibly can, racing away from the car. Suddenly the scene ends.

The viewer is left to wonder what is going on. You’re not sure at all what’s going on yet, but you can tell that whatever it is, it’s not good.

Second Scene, Man Chases Man.

This scene is from the view of the car. So the man is running away from the car, and he’s moving fast toward an older man, not too far away at this point. The older man is dressed in an overcoat and hat, carrying a briefcase, and he is unaware of the man chasing him. The guy in the dead run heads right straight at the guy carrying a briefcase and has his arms around him ready to shove hard when that scene concludes.

Now what do you know so far? Your suspicion in the first scene is now at least confirmed. You learned that something wasn’t good, and now you know it’s like a robbery, a mugging, tackling this old guy for some reason. You’re not exactly sure, but you’ve now confirmed that it’s not good.

Third Scene, Rope Gives Way. Now the view is from above, where you see workmen hoisting a load of bricks, when one of the ropes gives way. The pallet that held all the bricks begins to tilt, and it would have landed right on top of the old man except now he has been shoved completely away by the guy running toward him. The commercial concludes with *The Guardian* displaying its slogan, “The Whole Picture.”

This commercial became famous because it was beautifully done. You could tell from each of the three scenes what your impression was, but then once you saw the whole film, things were completely reversed. As it became famous, this television ad ended up being a great ad for the newspaper.

Nearly 20 years later, *The Guardian* came up with another advertisement in its “open journalism” campaign..

The Cannes Lion for The Guardian

You’ve heard of the Cannes Film Festival for movies. Well, believe it or not, there is a category for television commercials called the Cannes Lion and the following ad won the top commercial award in the Lion category at Cannes in 2012.

I highly recommend that you google it and watch the two-minute ad. The sponsor is *The Guardian* and it’s the “Three Little Pigs” ad. It moves fast, so I’m going to tell you the story in staccato fashion. Here we go.

“Opening scene. Inside the home of the Three Little Pigs. They are boiling water in a huge iron cauldron in their fireplace. In it they’re boiling alive the Big Bad Wolf.

SWAT Team Arrests Three Pigs

“A SWAT team storms the house, arrests the Three Little Pigs. The social media are outraged. After all, the Wolf has already blown down two of the three houses. You can’t blame the Pigs for trying to defend their third house.

“‘Hey! It’s the Pigs who are victims here!’ But video surfaces showing the Wolf on a bus. He is using an inhaler. ‘Wait a minute! The Wolf has

asthma. He couldn’t have been the one who blew down those other two houses.’

“Investigative journalism kicks in. The Pigs were committing an insurance fraud. The first two houses had already fallen down. The Pigs killed the wolf just to cover their tracks.

Pigs Get off the Hook

“But why insurance fraud? Because the Pigs were behind on their mortgage payment. Social media kicks in again. ‘Hey, I’m behind on my mortgage payment too.’ ‘The rates are too high.’ ‘The banks are killing us.’ Protests ensue outside against the banks.

“The Three Little Pigs become a cause célèbre. *The Guardian* newspaper displays its slogan again, ‘The Whole Picture.’”

You can see why it won. It was a great TV commercial.

Let Us Talk About Mercy, Sin, and Grace

Now, okay. Despite that introduction to my sermon, what I would like to do today is to talk about mercy and sin and grace. Here’s a text from Micah. This is the way the prophet Micah concludes:

“Who is a god like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession?

He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency.

He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot.

He will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

He will show faithfulness and unswerving loyalty as he has to our ancestors from the days of old.”

Also, There’s Repentance and Forgiveness

All three Abrahamic faiths set aside a time each year for special, deeper reflection upon such things as mercy, sin, grace, repentance, and forgiveness. For Christians it’s Lent. In Islam it’s Ramadan. For Jews it’s the high holy days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. For Christians it is Ash Wednesday to Easter. Forty days, remembering the forty years of the wanderings of the children of Israel before they arrived in the Holy Land. And remembering the forty-day fast of Christ in the wilderness before he went to the Jordan River to be baptized and then to begin his public ministry.

For Christ it was a preparation, and then we try to follow the example of contemplation, humility, simplicity, an honest soul-searching. For Ramadan it is remembering the revelation that Muhammad received, 29 days because it’s based on the lunar calendar. A fast every day from daybreak until the first stars at evening. And then in Judaism from Rosh Hashanah, which is commonly and culturally known as simply the Jewish New Year, but actually, more mystically, it is the birthday of the world.

And then the time between is considered to be an annual Sabbath with contemplation, reflection, quietude up to the day of atonement, the day when the connection to God, the enfolding into God is celebrated. And so it’s a time of reflecting upon personal and collective sin and asking for personal and collective forgiveness, grace, and mercy.

Sin and Repentance Are not Biblical

Now the issue, a very core issue, in the religious sensibilities of our time, is that our understanding of such things, particularly like sin and repentance, just simply isn’t biblical. It has much more to do with the Spanish Inquisition than with the Bible.

Let me give you a couple of examples: I know you’ve heard some of this stuff before. Let me put it together for you very quickly. In the New Testament, the word for sin is “hamartia,” and it means literally “missing the mark.” I know most of you know this. It’s an archery term. So at a hundred yards, you’ve got your target, you’ve got a bullseye in the middle. You shoot, and darn it, you missed. It doesn’t mean that you turned around and shot your instructor; it doesn’t mean you shot the opposite way. It just means you missed the mark.

In Hebrew the word for sin is “chet,” and guess what that means literally: “Missing the mark.” It means exactly the same thing. In our culture the idea of sin has this notion of moral corruption, a sense of depravity. But in the Bible it’s much more the sense of a mistake. You tried, you could have tried harder, but you missed the mark by ten inches or by three feet. It’s different for all of us.

Two Great Words: Teshuva (Hebrew) And Metanoia (Greek)

And then, repentance. Two marvelous words found in the Bible. In the Hebrew it’s “teshuva,” and it means literally “to return.” If you want a spot-on definition of teshuva, look at the story of “The Prodigal Son.” Jesus was telling that story to explain what repentance is. To return. You have wandered away and now it is time to go back home, to return, plain and simple.

And then, in the New Testament, there's "metanoia," a fascinating word. The "meta" prefix basically means "beyond," but there's more, having the sense of enhance, expand, grow. And the "noia," is "mind," as in "paranoia." Therefore, "metanoia" means to go beyond your present way of thinking, to expand it, to enhance it.

And so now you look at these two words, "sin" and "repentance," and in our culture it's like you're beating your breast in moral depravity and then trying to beg for forgiveness out of it versus the biblical sense of a mistake. It's time to expand our way of thinking and grow beyond that and return home — a much gentler version of it.

Now Let Me Tell You a Story

You make up your own mind about sin and repentance in this one.

I tell you this story because it was very formative for me, particularly concerning the time when it happened. I had been called to my first church in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, in 1984, right out of seminary, and I had been there for about one year when I learned something about the person who was the Clerk of Session, by the name of Jim.

First, you must know that in the Presbyterian Church, there is a strong desire to maintain parity, a balance of power between clergy and lay people. So the person who is the number-one lay person in the church is the Clerk of Session and bears that title. Jim had been Clerk of Session at my church for 32 years.

He had seen six ministers come and go. And by golly I was going to be the seventh to go. I didn't know it at the time, but he actually despised the ground I walked on.

It started with a letter-writing campaign, also unbeknown to me, wherein monthly but sometimes biweekly, he would write a letter to the other Session members outlining my shortcomings of the preceding period: sermons, the way I ran the Session meeting, the way I did ministry, all the people I didn't visit, and so forth.

He outlined it all, usually two pages, single-spaced, peppered with a lot of four-letter words. Also unbeknown to me was that each Session member who received this letter every month, which was pretty much everyone, saw who it was from, threw it away, and didn't bother to read it.

This pattern continued until about the one-year mark, when he crossed the line in a major way.

When I was back at Perdue, I bought a house that I had renovated. Then when I left Perdue to go to seminary, the housing market was pretty lousy, and the house wouldn't sell, so I rented it all through seminary. Then during that first year at my first church it finally sold, and I made a profit of \$6,000 on that sale. So I felt like I was rolling in bucks.

My Taxes Become the Source of a Felony

Because I had never done a Schedule C before in my life, I wasn't sure how to account for it tax-wise. Naturally I decided I should have somebody do my taxes that year. And Jim, Clerk of Session for 32 years, was an H&R Block representative.

"Jim, would you mind doing my taxes?" "Sure, no problem." He did my taxes correctly and mailed them in. So far, so good. But then he photocopied my tax return and included copies of it with the monthly letter to everybody on the Session. The accompanying letter also bore this comment: "See,

this is why he does not deserve a raise this coming year,” even though it was in April.

Well it turns out that what he did was a felony. Finally, one of the other Session members came to me and showed me my own private taxes as well as some of the old letters. I read them in anguish, and my heart sank to the pit of my stomach. I realized I did not want to be pastor of that church anymore at all.

Of course all of this takes place on a Saturday morning, and I don't have my sermon done for the following day. But I did not care. I was going to leave that church, and basically I was angry, frustrated, mad, crying inside, and I didn't care what happened on that Sunday morning. Instead Tracy and I decided to drive to scenic Owego and walk around the block there and have lunch somewhere. We walked and talked and walked and talked the entire afternoon.

The Time Had Come to Fight Back

Owing to the wisdom of my soulmate, I came to realize that I'd been nice long enough. Time to fight back because I've got this old man who is stomping on my brand-new career, about which I was pretty excited and happy.

I managed to get through Sunday morning, and first thing after church I called for a special Session meeting, at which point I asked for a vote of confidence. Do you want me to remain as your pastor? Yes or no. But if I were to remain, Jim would have to go. What he had done crossed the line, and his travesty was not redeemable.

The Session voted. I took all the little slips of paper, excused myself to another room, and went through them. Not only were they

all affirmative in my favor, but many notes were written on them pleading for me to stay.

And so I reentered the Session room, told the members about the vote, and I asked for Jim's resignation right then and there. He stormed out and never again darkened the door of that church.

The collateral damage fell on Jim's wife, Irene, a sweet, lovely lady, who was caught in the middle between two strong egos.

I ended up having a fine pastorate at that church, staying on for nearly eight years before moving to Binghamton. While there I learned that Jim had died. He was in his 80's then, so he lived into his early 90's.

Later I received a letter from his son, and I certainly was surprised to receive any communication at all from that family. In the letter were two thank-yous. One for not pressing charges against his dad. It would have ruined him. It would have devastated him. "Thanks for not doing that."

A Thank-You Pulls the Rug Out

The second thank-you pulled the rug out from under me emotionally. "Thank you for being so gentle with my father about his mental illness." I had never thought about that situation as a mental illness. For me, it was as black-and-white as it gets. He had wronged me deeply. He had lied. He had libeled. He had gossiped. You name it. Hard-core Schedule I sins.

Except now I look at it in a different light. And that's what I'm asking you to do because, during this Lenten season, we have an opportunity to look more deeply inside ourselves. What once was an egregious sin leaves clouds of concern in my mind these days.

On the other hand, if you look in the Bible, premarital sex is forbidden. Okay. I haven't married a couple not already living together in 20 years. ["40 years!" shouted the Rev. Bob White from the congregation, followed by uproarious laughter. Art responded, "Thank you, Bob.

And So, Is It a Sin or Not?

And it's like one of these things from the Bible that, well, gosh, maybe we should say "Yes," but in the back of their minds, nobody could care less and basically their answer is "No problem."

We pray every Sunday morning for a young man named Bruno, who's from our church. He's been in the State Penitentiary for years now. I think he's got about one more year to go, but there's no doubt that he had committed a serious crime.

But was it a sin or the action of a foolish man who was dealing with a lot of issues in his life that led him to make a profound mistake that young men are prone to do. Which is it? Of course I don't know the answer to this, and you don't either. But my point is that it's not a black-and-white situation.

And so between the things that we call sins but really aren't, and the things that we call sins but actually are mistakes, and the things

that we call sins that actually are illnesses, there's plenty of room for mistaken judgments. The same applies to people acting out of their illnesses, particularly various forms of mental illness.

What is it? What is left? That's why I told you about those ads. Look at the whole picture. We live in an extraordinarily judgmental society, and we're too often not given to looking at the whole picture when considering the foibles of other people.

If someone sinned against you, well, what was it? For real? Or was it an illness or a mistake or just something that sort of made you mad?

And What Have You Done to Others?

What was your core motivation for it? And if, after running through that kind of thought process, it's still a sin, then forgive the transgression.

That's what you are ordered to do. It is not an option. It is your duty. Forgive.

Which brings me to that line in II Corinthians 5: 18: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave US the ministry of reconciliation."

Amen.