

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 23, 2007 Pentecost 17, 155th Anniversary of First Church, dedicated to Claire Frances Hills on her baptismal day, to the clergy and laity of all ages who through 155 years of life together have been witnesses of Christ's love and justice, to the Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden, our Pastor from December 24, 1882 -July 2, 1918, to the Gladden Scholars - John Cramton, Pam Doore, and Charlie Knerr and always to the Glory of God!

“Gladden Your Hearts”
I Timothy 2:1-7, Luke 16: 1-13

Above the front doors on Broad Street, chiseled in stone are these words, “Enter to Worship Depart to Serve.” In this spirit, let us continue our worship of God . . .

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Having come this far into the Gospel readings of Luke, we need to lay this on the table: Jesus is acting and teaching offensively. Jesus is picking fights when he doesn't need to do so. The parable Luke tells in the sixteenth chapter is offensive. And this parable is packed with problems.

The first problem is: what is the manager up to? Is his squandering of property a form of embezzlement or simply mismanagement? The former makes him a criminal, the latter just a poor manager.

The second problem: the meaning of the parable. Is the parable really about the manager whose shrewdness is praiseworthy or is it about the incredibly generous manager/rich man, who like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, doesn't exact retribution for "squandering property," but surprises everyone by commending the manager?

The third problem is: what to do with Luke 16:9, which tells us: "*Make friends by means of unrighteous mammon so that when it fails, you may receive eternal life?*" We wish we had Jesus on videotape with this one - so we can pick-up the nuances of his ironic delivery, because the Greek doesn't capture the fullness of his expressions. Taken literally (and this is Exhibit A on "why you can't take the Bible literally!"), it appears that Jesus is encouraging dishonesty in business dealings as a way into heaven. Rip off your neighbors and go directly to the pearly gates. The Greek actually translates: "*I am talking to you: for yourselves make friends out of the mammon of injustice, in order that whenever it should fail, they will welcome you into the tents of eon!*"

Do you see how this parable leaves scholars, preachers, and you as lay people scratching your heads, creating more questions and making up multiple explanations about Jesus' intentions and the meaning of his stories? Riddled with problems and questions, it is still our blessed text for the day. (Thanks be to God.)

As if snow globes in the hands of the master, I see Jesus shaking and turning people upside down so to look at themselves. He is challenging and quite literally, offending people. He is "pushing buttons" and asking: Are you honest or dishonest in your business dealings? Do you try to take advantage of people for gain or help them in their struggles? Are you faithful in the things of this world so that you become capable of faithfulness with things in the next world? If these questions push YOUR buttons, then you need to look at that. If they don't, you also need to look at that - for you are either in denial or you are free to drive in the fast lane to glory.

For 155 years, First Congregational Church of Columbus has been in the button pushing business in central Ohio. It's almost like Luke 16 was written for us! When 42 men and their families left Second Presbyterian on September 26, 1852, to become 3rd Presbyterian Church, they did so because they could no longer abide in the unity of slavery with Christian faith. Although their separation was recorded as "amiable," they must have pushed some buttons of those they left behind. The message was clear: *"We think slavery is wrong. We are doing the right thing. Moreover, we cannot be in covenant with a denomination in which baptized members are slave owners. On this, there is no compromise! Here we stand, we can do no other!"*

When these abolitionists built a new church, they constructed it on Capital Square in 1856 as The First Congregational Church of Columbus (as an aside - we are actually "Second" Congregational Church, the first was founded by Welch Congregationalists in the 1830s. The Welch liked their name and agreed that we could be "First Congregational." Faithful to the end, the old Welch Congregational Church is now Faith Mission on Long Street).

Anyway, they built First Church on the northwest corner of Capital Square so that legislators in the Statehouse would always know that a consciousness of freedom was there as a witness for justice in Columbus. Perhaps that choice allowed Ohio to become a FREE state by only one vote.

Let's face it, the pulpit of First Church has always been offensive to somebody in town. We have been in the button pushing business for 155 years. Through trolley worker strikes, coal miner strikes, legislation in city hall for clean milk, clean water, housing regulations for the poor, civil rights, rallies for racial unity and through several wars - including the Civil War - we have been challenging injustice all these years.

On Wednesday, when I speak to a statewide rally against the death penalty in Ohio, my feet will once again trod on stone steps, now well worn by the boots and shoes of almost every Senior Pastor this congregation has called to its pulpit.

This is the house that justice built. And when 444 East Broad Street opened 76 years ago, it was dedicated to the memory of The Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden - our greatest single voice of social justice. Since today is our anniversary Sunday and the Gladden scholars are present, I will briefly lift up the memory and story of Dr. Gladden.

Solomon Washington Gladden was born February 11, 1836, in Pottsgrove, Pennsylvania, of old but undistinguished New England stock. His paternal ancestors descended from John Gladding, who came to Plymouth in 1640; his great-grandfather, Azariah Gladding served as a bodyguard to George Washington in the American Revolution. It was Gladden's grandfather, Thomas, who changed the name from Gladding to Gladden. Both Thomas and his grandfather Daniels were shoemakers and farm hands in Owego, New York. Washington's father, Solomon, was a teacher only because of poor health, which claimed his life when Washington was five. In 1841, Amanda Gladden took her two sons, Washington and George back to the farm in Owego, New York, where the boys grew from age 5 to 13. From 13 to 17, the young Gladden apprenticed at the *Owego Gazette*, while living in the attic of Hiram Beebe, the paper's publisher.

From western New York, Gladden traveled to Williams College in Williamstown, Mass. He graduated with an English degree, which he used to write, edit, publish and ultimately preach across the world. His only theological degrees came as honorary degrees in years hence.*

In *Recollections*, the 31st of 39 books, written when he was 73 years old, Dr. Gladden opens with these words:

The story I have undertaken to tell is that of an average American . . . It takes us along country roads and through busy thoroughfares of cities; it will observe, and try to interpret, the life of all sorts and conditions of American men and women (*Recollections*, Washington Gladden, Houghton Mifflin Co., The Riverside Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1909, p.1).

From early childhood, Washington Gladden was a lover of language, a voracious reader, poet, singer and songwriter. He grew up in the church and was drawn to the religious awakening of his childhood and young adulthood. It was clear from his early days he was called to write and preach. And from the earliest years, his greatest influences were Congregational pastors and theologians including Lyman Beecher and Charles Finney.

When Washington married Jennie Cohoon in December 1860, his future ties to First Church began, for Jennie was a member of this congregation. He had met her in Owego while she attended the boarding school there. But it wasn't until the late fall of 1882, that Washington Gladden received a letter from Francis C. Sessions inviting him to become the sixth pastor of First Congregational Church. In a letter of encouragement from Roswell Smith, the editor of *The Century* (now *the Christian Century*), Smith told Gladden to accept the position because, "*Every man ought to go to the West and live out there a few years of his life . . . you would tower out there head and shoulders above other men, in influence*" (*Recollections*, pp.282-283).

Gladden accepted the invitation and came "west." His first sermon was delivered on Christmas Eve, 1882. From the pulpit of First Church, Dr. Gladden spoke to America and the entire world.

He was head and shoulders above not only the preachers of Columbus, but above most preachers of his times.

On Sunday mornings, he preached on the virtues of living the Christian life. On Sunday evenings, he preached on social issues of the day. On Monday mornings, excerpts of his Sunday night sermons appeared for many years on page one of *The Ohio State Journal*, the morning paper for the city. His library was filled with books on economics and literature. Until the end of his days, he wrote - even after a stroke, which largely disabled him at the end of November 1917. With his right arm paralyzed, Gladden taught himself to type with his left hand. He continued to write articles, letters and hymns until his dying day on July 2, 1918.

Gladden always believed in the Social Gospel. He believed that the intersection of faith was found in the symbiotic relationship of personal salvation and social salvation. One could not be without the other. There was no faithfulness in believing only in your own salvation. God's promise of salvation was for the world and we cannot rest until the world is fed, clothed, cared for and loved as Jesus taught us to do.

When Rev. Carl Patton came to First Church as Gladden's associate in 1911, he told Dr. Gladden that he was interested primarily in liberal religious thought and the social application of the teachings of Christ. According to Patton, Gladden looked at him, let one eyelid droop in a manner that will be remembered by his old friends, and said, "*Well, what else IS there?*"

This past Christmas, Susan totally surprised me with 18 books of Washington Gladden, which brings my total personal collection of his writings to 25 books. As I have read Dr. Gladden's writings, I find him to be universally engaging. His words, most of them more than 100 years old, are as true today as they must have been in his times. His insights into social problems, including the nature of

war, the operations of city systems in Columbus, the want of justice in the criminal justice system and the purposelessness of the death penalty ring true in our times as well as his. In addition, his compassion for the struggles of young men in their lives of faith (especially building up the ministries of men in the church), his understanding of parish problems, the plights of pastors and their families and finally his remarkable insights into the Bible as a book for all people and not a fundamentalist tract to be used by some as a weapon against others, can speak to us today.

At the end of *Recollections*, Washington Gladden sums up his experience in Christian faith with these words:

I am fain to believe that the time is drawing near when the Christian church will be able to discern and to declare this simple truth that Religion is nothing but Friendship; friendship with God and with (our fellow human beings). I have been thinking much about it in these last days, and I cannot make it mean anything else; so far as I can see, this is all there is to it. Religion is friendship - friendship first with the Great Companion, of whom Jesus told us, is nearer to us than we are to ourselves, and whose inspiration and help is the greatest fact of human experience. To be in harmony with his purposes, to be open to his suggestions, to be in conscious fellowship with Him, this is religion on the Godward side.

Then, turning manward (to the human condition), friendship sums it all up. To be friends with everybody, to fill every human relation with the spirit of friendship, is there anything more than this that the wisest and best of people can hope for?

If the church could accept this truth - religion is Friendship - and build its own life upon it and make it central and organic in all its teaching, should we not see a great revival of religion? (Recollections, pp. 429-430).

As we go forth to serve, may the spirit of Jesus (our Great companion) and the spirit of the first members of First Church (both of whom pushed buttons and rejected the injustices of times past) guide the spirit of this church, which pushes buttons and pushes back against the darkness of our times. And may the Spirit of Dr. Gladden and the spirit of friendship guide our way into the days unfolding before us - as we depart to serve. In Christ's name. Amen.

* Found in *Washington Gladden: Prophet of the Social Gospel*, by Jacob Dorn, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, Ohio, 1966, pp. 17ff