

“NOTHING TO BE GAINED”

A Sermon Delivered at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

by the Rev. Ken Sawyer

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As some of you may already be aware, this first month of 2002 will bring the release of a new book that will include some of the more amusing corrections that *The New York Times* has had to make in its 150-year history. The book is entitled *Kill Duck Before Serving: Red Faces at The New York Times*. The *Times* itself this fall provided a few examples from the book in advance, beginning with this rather wordy notice from 1859:

“By a confusion of manuscripts, sent up at a late hour on Friday night, our leading article of Saturday on the Austrian Defensive Square was rendered perfectly unintelligible. As our extremely ridiculous blunder afforded matter for much legitimate and good-natured merriment to our contemporaries of the Sunday press, and a happy occasion for airing a little envy, malice and uncharitableness to the less respectable among the daily journals, the newspaper world is indebted to us for making it, and our apology is addressed to the world of readers alone.” (7/18/1859)

In more recent examples, the paper had to admit that “Because of a transcription error, an article about Senator Alfonse M. D’Amato’s remarks about Judge Lance A. Ito misquoted the senator at one point. In his conversation with radio host Don Imus, he said: ‘I mean, this is a disgrace. Judge Ito will be well known.’ He did not say, ‘Judge Ito with a wet nose.’” (4/7/1995) And that “A column about restaurants in Beijing misidentified Shen Xuanhai, owner of the home that is now the Bamboo Garden Hotel.... Mr. Shen [is] a prominent businessman and government official; he [is] not the Qing Dynasty palace eunuch who designed the gardens.” [6/10/2001]

Of course, church publications have also been known to make mistakes on occasion. Just this past Christmas, for example, our church in Riverside, California, decided to type out the words to "Joy To the World" in the order of service so that, as the minister [Cynthia Caine] tells it, they “could use the REAL words and not the UU Hymnal PC version. [But] our office manager made a typo, so instead of saying ‘Joy to the world, the Savior reigns,’ it read ‘Joy to the world, the Savior resigns.’ So much for restoring theological meaning.”

Another colleague reports that “In the same vein, our last year’s community Christmas Eve service was attended by over a thousand people from many churches. Imagine our chagrin when we noticed that the words in the order of service for Hark the Herald Angels Sing read ‘Peace on Earth, Good Will to Me.’ I could only hope that people realized it was a typo....” [author’s name lost]

We’ve even done something like that ourselves, and to our own home-grown hymn, “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear.” The final lines look forward to “the age of gold: when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling....” One year the words we printed up looked forward to “the age of gold: when peach shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,” an interesting fashion prognosis, but not what Edmund Hamilton Sears had in mind.

But I want to return to the world of newsprint for a few final citations, the last of which will finally get us to the title and topic of the sermon this morning. These were collected by Richard Lederer and printed in one of my major sources of information and sanity, *The Funny Times*. I will only share a few. “In Frank Washburn’s March column, Rebecca Varney was erroneously identified as a bookmaker. She is a typesetter.” “Our article about Jewish burial customs contained an error: Mourners’ clothing is rent – that is, torn -- not rented.” “In the City Beat section of Friday’s paper, firefighter Dwight Brady was misidentified. His nickname in the department is ‘Dewey.’ Another firefighter is nicknamed ‘Weirdo.’ We apologize for our mistake.”

I don’t know, I think those are believable. Not all alleged corrections are. Lederer includes a correction that reads, “We apologize to our readers who received, through an unfortunate computer error, the chest measurements of members of the Female Wrestlers Association instead of the figures on the sales of soybeans to foreign countries.” I just doubt that actually happened.

But I am willing to accept the probable truth of my favorite. It is a two-sentence retraction: “Just to keep the record straight, it was the famous Whistler’s Mother, not Hitler’s, that was exhibited. There is nothing to be gained in trying to explain how this error occurred.”

Nothing to be gained.

I feel like those two sentences suggest a whole story about the hour the writer spent between his or her realization of the error, which was easy enough to describe in the first sentence, and when he or she wrote the second sentence, giving up on what I imagine was a fervent search for some other way of concluding the notice.

I picture the writer trying to get across that it was only because the cell phone reception was faulty, and a deadline had arrived inconveniently, and the usual person was out with the flu, and this, and that, and not that anyone at the paper thought that the famous painting was really of the mother of Adolph Hitler, nor that the newspaper staff had anything but revulsion for Hitler, although maybe it shouldn’t be held against his mother... Did I mention that this was done by cell phone?

I picture the writer wondering for a mad moment if there shouldn’t be a whole column devoted to explaining the mistake and how it happened. It could take longer than that to get the facts across, when you really stop to think about it.

And I picture the writer, at just that point, realizing that the only thing to say, after acknowledging the error, is that “There is nothing to be gained in trying to explain how this error occurred.” What can she or he do but throw herself/himself on the mercy and good sense of the readers, who at their most wise are fellow members of the human community of the fallible.

We live in a world where ridiculous errors abound. Many of us try to contribute as few as we can to the total, but we make some, too, and others just happen in ways past explaining. What can we say but we’re sorry, what can we do but move on?

So much of religion, so much of our deepest personal issues reside in this area of responsibility, acceptance, forgiveness, and blame. I am not hoping to resolve it all today. I just want to take up one part of the puzzle, especially on this first Sunday of a new year. I just want to affirm that there are times when there is nothing to be gained from further attention to this issue or that, this grievance or that, this expectation or that.

But stop for a moment, before you decide that you never again have to visit Aunt Eunice, or listen to your brother complain about your father, or whatever. Most of us have some of those “whatevers,” matters we’ve struggled with, tried to cope with, kept hoping would finally work out though it seems that they never do and maybe never will.

Sometimes what’s called for is perseverance, because maybe things will work out at last, or maybe they never will but it’s worth hanging in there anyway, because as difficult as Eunice can be, your visits seem to make her life more pleasant. There is something to be gained, unwelcome as the cost may be to you.

That fact is another part of the puzzle and worth its own sermon some Sunday, I guess. As the Bible says, “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: ...A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; ... a time to get and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away.” [Ecc. 3:1,2,6] And figuring out which time is which is often no easy matter. I can’t offer any formula to use, though I’m always ready to sit down with any of you and think through the question as it applies to some aspect of your own life.

Maybe you do want to keep visiting Eunice, but maybe it is time to tell your brother you don’t want to hear any more complaints about your dad. Maybe you want to hold on to all that camera equipment for a while longer, because you still may find time to use it, but maybe you could gain some bookshelf space if you could admit you just are never going to teach yourself Chinese.

There is a time when you can give up the effort: there’s just nothing to be gained. I once had a broker whose recommended stock after stock whose share price would promptly and irreversibly plummet. I about broke even because I picked a few stocks on my own, and they all did well. There was not much money involved, and I don’t know who I ever imagined would care, but I saved the records of this time in a manila envelope, so that if I did ever have cause to tell the tale, to lodge my complaint, I could substantiate it. I had the numbers. Last month I threw the folder away. I mean really, there was nothing to be gained. The guy was my broker in the last ‘70s.

I threw away an old pair of sneakers, too. I have even gotten to the point where I think I’m about ready to throw away my notes from college, since I haven’t had reason to refer to them once in the last 35 years. But I know for a lot of us, it’s the old arguments, the old explanations, old understandings laboriously come by, that are hard to let go of.

In fact, for some of us, it’s hard to let go of almost anything. Truth is, that particular pair of sneakers was so beat up, I could have thrown them out two years ago. For people who don’t move on easily, it may help to have holidays like New Years and rituals like spring cleaning. Personally, I think of a computer virus last month. Its name is BadTrans, it spread quickly and widely, but was said to be not very damaging, so I was a little slow in getting it out, giving it a chance suddenly to eat every email message I’ve ever saved at my main email address.

And I had saved a lot, creating dozens of file folders, many of them with dozens and dozens of messages. I could recreate for you the entire interaction around any number of difficult situations. It would have been no trouble to explain and justify, even celebrate, my role in these various discussions. But why? What was to be gained?

At least, that seems to have been BadTrans’ thinking, for it cleaned out every folder I had. And while this was not my first thought, I’ve been wondering since if BadTrans didn’t do me a favor. Now if I could just get it to take on my garage.

The area in India where I'm going at the end of the month has the highest rainfall in the world, mostly in the spring. The one native I know, who's working here at the UUA this year, says in her village this causes their one bridge, made of local vines, to wash out. Every spring, the swollen river sweeps the year-old bridge away. When the river recedes, they gather vines and build a new bridge. But here's the thing: rather than feeling put upon, the natives have decided to regard the loss of the bridge each year as a sign of good luck. When it happens, they rejoice.

It's an attitude I'm trying to foster in myself at the start of this new year. Maybe I should regard a December visit from BadTrans as a holiday treat, and if it can't be counted on to come on schedule, maybe I should do its work myself and every year let the old folders go. I should probably spend a little while considering what things deserved to be saved, whose time it is to keep, but as to the rest, when there's nothing to be gained, the time has come to cast away.

But this notion that there is nothing to be gained in some behaviors doesn't just apply to how we handle the past. It comes up over and over again every day. You're trying to explain how Hitler got into an art review, and you just have to throw up your hands. You're tempted to try one more time to achieve some goal you've failed at repeatedly, like trying to change some behavior pattern in your child or partner, and it comes to you, reasonable as your effort may be, it's not going to lead to anything but your own frustration and failure, and that's nothing to be gained.

When I read the quotation about Whistler and Hitler to Erin, with the author in effect throwing up his or her hands, she said this would be my "Tontu fise prami" sermon, "tontu fise prami" being a Portuguese phrase that conveys that sense that "There's nothing I can do about it," I just can't care, it's something I can't solve. You know, "tontu fise prami," let go on to something else.

Because after all, there are only so many things we can take on in a day or in a lifetime. The hours are not infinite, nor are our energies. As Emerson wrote,

There's not enough for this and that,
 Make thy option which of two;
 ...Leave the many and hold the few. ["Terminus"]

Let's hope we have the sense and luck to leave the many things that offer nothing to be gained, and discern the few things are worth our doing, best we can, and hold on to them.