

## WISE AS SERPENTS

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1  
Luke 16:1-13

Faith Community  
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### Introduction

When I worked at the Presbyterian Church in Northville, we often had people who came in to ask for money. We were so close to the race track that we suspected people had lost money and wanted more to try to win back their losses. We didn't give out money, but offered to help with food or gas or other specific needs. Often people said, "No, that's OK," and left.

One day a man came into my office and asked for money. He said he was a member of a Presbyterian church in Indiana, and was a regular churchgoer. Just on a whim I reached back over my head and pulled down the directory of Presbyterian churches in the United States. "Where in Indiana did you say that was?" I asked. He jumped to his feet. "Well, if you're going to be that way about it, forget it." He quickly left my office.

I have no doubt he had been to other churches and gotten money before he came to me, probably claiming to be whatever denomination they were.

### I

Sometimes Christians are kinder than they are wise. We want to help people, but if we aren't careful, our help might make a bad situation worse. If that man was already in debt from betting losses and we give him more money to try to win his way back, chances are he will end up even further in debt.

Sometimes churches give money to people when that only enables those people to further their addiction or habit. The city of San Francisco for several years handed out cash to the homeless people in their city. They discovered that a lot of the people they were giving money to were using it to buy drugs or alcohol and sustaining the problems that made them homeless. Our naiveté can not only be unhelpful, but it can continue a spiral of destruction.

The great British novelist Graham Greene wrote a number of novels in which a character is good, but in his naiveté his goodness results in evil. Greene seemed to appreciate the irony that good can bring about evil if we aren't wise in how it is carried out.

Jesus encourages us to be both kind and smart, both caring and wise, both innocent and clever. In Matthew, Jesus says to his disciples: "*See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*" That's not easy.

I think of Desmond Tutu, the former archbishop of South Africa and a leader in the fight against apartheid there. He is a profoundly devout Christian, and I'm sure that in dealing with that racist government, he had to be both wise and clever to be able to bring about dramatic change without causing violent bloodshed. He had to hold on to the purity of his search for freedom, and at the same time deal wisely with the government that was fighting against him. He had to be wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove.

## II

That's where this troubling parable comes in. This parable has baffled Christians for centuries. Everything about it seems wrong. An owner calls in his manager, who's been cooking the books. He fires him because he's crooked and makes him turn in an accounting of what he's done.

Yeow, the guys in trouble – his smooth hands won't be able to handle digging ditches, and he's way too proud to be on the street corner panhandling. So what's he going to do now?

He figures it out. He's going to make friends and also help out his boss. He calls in the people who owe his boss. "How much do you owe?" "One hundred jugs of olive oil." "Fine, give us 50 and we'll call it even." Next, "How much do you owe?" "One hundred containers of wheat." "OK, make it 80 and we're good." He goes on and on thru all the debtors.

What he is cutting out here is his commission. He's sacrificing what he probably couldn't collect anyway, and bringing in the payments owed his boss. He is helping his boss collect what's owed him, and at the same time making lots of friends who get a big discount on their debts. It's a shrewd deal that helps out everybody involved.

When he turns in the accounting to his boss, the boss commends him for his wisdom. Smart move. (The boss doesn't hire him back, but he's thankful to have his debts collected.)

In this situation the manager has been very clever. The parable ends with a comment to the effect that it would be good for the "children of light" to be as shrewd in dealing with their generation. The parable seems to be saying, "Be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves."

## III

It is an extraordinarily difficult line to walk. It is so easy to fall off one side or the other – to be so shrewd that you are not innocent, or so innocent that you fail to be smart.

Look at Jesus' life. He often had to be shrewd in dealing with people who were out to trap him. Many times religious leaders came to him and asked loaded questions. They approached him with a question hoping they could get him to say something that would get him in trouble. Usually Jesus didn't answer their question, but responded with an equally difficult question of his own. When they saw that they couldn't answer his question, they went away.

Several of Jesus' parables are very clever in that they lead us down a path until suddenly we see our own fault or self-righteousness, and by then it is too late. The story has caught us.

Nathan's parable to King David in the Old Testament is a similar kind of story. David has done a horrible thing in having an affair with one of his commander's wife. He makes it worse by sending this commander into battle and leaving him alone so that he is killed. Nathan is the prophet who has to approach David and confront him with his sin, and yet he would like to keep from being beheaded.

So Nathan tells David a story about a poor man who had one little yew lamb. One day a rich man who had lots of sheep comes to that poor man and takes his only lamb, because he is going

to serve it to guests who have arrived at his house. The rich man didn't want to use any of his own sheep, so he took the poor man's.

King David is furious when he hears about this and declares, "The man who has done this deserves to die." Then quietly Nathan says to David, "You are the man." Nathan has very cleverly opened David's eyes to his failure. Because of his cleverness, Nathan was able to confront David with his failure and bring about change. He was both shrewd and innocent.

### **Conclusion**

In May 2002 former President Jimmy Carter visited and spoke in Cuba at the invitation of Fidel Castro. Carter negotiated his visit so that he could visit churches throughout Cuba and that his speech would not be censored in any way.

When he went to Cuba, Carter visited congregations throughout the country. He encouraged Christians there to develop and deepen their faith.

In his closing speech, with Castro present, Carter surprised everyone by delivering his speech in Spanish, so everyone could understand him without a translator. In that speech he took on Castro for trampling human rights. He called for greater freedoms for people, especially the Christians in Cuban churches.

Because he was shrewd, Jimmy Carter got the attention of Castro and brought tremendous encouragement to the Christians of Cuba. Because he was smart, Carter was able to speak a strong word for freedom in a restricted country. If he hadn't been wise, Carter's trip might have been used by Castro for propaganda.

Jesus tells us to be both innocent and smart, both wise and pure. "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves," he says. It's difficult to do, but very important.

Amen