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"THE UGLY MISSIONARY"

A Sermon preached by Dr. Ralph Winter

Calvary Presbyterian Church March 7, 1971

I appreciate very much the opportunity to be with you this morning in this church, which has been a church related to us in various ways over the years. The topic which I was asked to suggest some days ago is a topic which I have never used before and I am not sure I will ever use it again. In any case, they needed to print something in the bulletin so I came up with this topic.

Unlike the average minister, who Sunday after Sunday gathers

together his thoughts in a once for all type of sermon, this has not been my experience nor my special field, to produce sermons within a single week and I must confess that my thoughts wandered all over the place as I was trying to draft them into shape underneath this topic.

"The Ugly Missionary" as a phrase obviously leans against the

famous phrase, "The Ugly American", which of course, as you all know is a book. There is a book by the title of "The Ugly American". I can recall only too well in Guatemala some years ago when that book came out, it was only a few months after that book became well‑known that the State Department people around the world began to feel a little embarrassed and restless about the fact that they were pretty much limited in their movementlto the capital city. And so for the first time in all the years we were in Guatemala, there were some American government officials out in the western part of the country. They concocted a reason to be there. There had been a small libary in the western part of the country up in the highlands where we lived, A U.S. Information Service Library run by Guatemalans and so they decided to have a Lincoln's Birthday party at the [U.S.I.S. library. They sent outThey](http://U.S.I.S.library.They) sent out

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They sent out engraved invitations to every American whose passport was registered in the embassy in the capital city whose address showed them to be in that area of the country. There is no way, apparently, that they could tell that these passports were held 100% by missionaries. They didn't really, apparently, suspect that these people who would turn out for this birthday party at the [U.S.I.S. Library](http://U.S.I.S.Library) on Lincoln's Birthday would be all missionaries. At least, I don't believe they would have brought so much whiskey along that evening. It was a very embarrassing evening. There were some high officials in the Guatemalan government, Guatemalan citizens of note in the area, and it was a rather cheap evening. There were two or three other reasons as well. This was in July; Lincoln's birthday was too far away to wait for. In the rush of trying to fulfill the ideals of that book, "The Ugly American," but of course since the library was called the "Lincoln Library" they had to do something right away that had to do with Lincoln. In any **case,** "The Ugly American" as a book was probably not read by 1/10 as many people who actually heard the name of it. And I think most people, to this day, assume that it is a book that makes out Americans to be "ugly". It shows that American citizens around the world, whether tourists or diplomats or business people, are presenting a kind of an ugly face to the non‑Western world. And in some respects, the book does show this ugly face. However, the hero of the book, there are two chapters of the book which do not speak in a derrogatory way about Americans. One of those two chapters is a chapter about a Jesuit missionary. The other chapter is itself entitled "The Ugly American" and it is the story of a very ugly civil engineer who runs back into the boondocks of the country and he really likes the people and works with them, and helps them in concrete and material ways and who won

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their respect and loyalty and esteem. So that in that sense, the ugly

American was a good American. He was the one they liked the best. Well

now the word "ugly" then is kind of an ambivalent word. Those who

appeared beautiful were ugly and those who appeared ugly were beautiful.

At least, that's the way that book goes.

As I thought this topic over further, I began to realize there

were other parallels for this phrase. There is the movie "Hawaii". I'm not sure whether you can remember back to those days. I remember when my wife and I were on a furlough we went on the date of our wedding anniversary to see this movie. This was at a time when we had to pay about $3.50 for a seat and we wouldn't have gone except that we had to do something special for our anniversary, and we discovered that the audience in this select theater in Hollywood (I can't remember the name of it now) was filled predominantly with young people. And here was this beautiful wide‑screen color movie on missionaries in Hawaii.

And of course the key missionary, Admiral Hale, actually a pseudonym for Hiram Bingham, a real person in history, is a very ugly person. He

is as ugly as the picture can make him. He is as ugly as they could have chosen a person to take that role, and everything about him is ugly. He does the wrong things. I can remember the time when his wife was ex­pecting a child and it was apparently coming a little too soon and they were living on one of the outer islands and they sent for the doctor who was supposed to be there in plenty of time and hadn't come and the missionary was desperately reading through a battered‑up old book on midwifery trying to prepare himself for this event and outside of his door as he went and opened it, when they knocked, were two or three midwives, who were all dressed up almost like nurses (they were native midwives) and they asked very pleasantly and courteously in a very beautiful way if they could help and he looked at them with the bigotry

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and prejudice of a New England Puritan and he growled at them and in that fateful moment, instead of saying "Yes" which would obviously

have been the reasonable thing to do since they had helped many

women in similar straits and he had not, he said "No!". And the whole audience in that theater just quivered and shook. You could just hear a wave of "Ohhhhhh" like that, that went across the audience. Here

was an ugly missionary, I will tell you.

Now, it is a tact, of **course,** of history that he did turn those

women away. He did superintend this birth himself. It is also a fact of history that Hawaiian midwives in those days did not deliver babies alive who were breech births. And this was a breech birth and he did, by the book, deliver that baby alive and this fact wasn't prominent in the picture.

You also see this ugly missionary preaching in a small little

grass hut to about fifty people, when as a matter of fact, that grass

hut was actually big enough to hold two thousand. You also see this

missionary stomping out the native religion with great gusto and

determination, when, as a matter of fact, the native religion collapsed

of its own weight because of the contact with the whalers who didn't

seem to be susceptible to the religious of the native religion.

This religion had collapsed forty years before the missionaries arrived.

They were not the ones who stomped out that native religion. In any

case, here is a classical case of the ugly missionary. I don't deny

that some missionaries have approached some of these stereotypes, but

at least I, myself, have never met any such people.

And as I thought further about this topic, my mind reflected back

upon passages in the Bible describing Christ Himself. Here is this

classical Old Testament passage looking forward to the coming of the

Messiah which says "He was despised and rejected by men. A man of

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sorrows and acquainted with grief and is one from whom men hide their

faces. He was despised and we esteemed Him not. He grew up before

Him like a young plant, like a root out of dry ground. He had no

form nor comeliness that we should look at Him and no beauty that we should desire Him. And yet, surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows and yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted, He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities and upon Him was the chastisement that made us whole. And with His stripes we are healed. We, like sheep, have gone astray and we have turned everyone to his own way and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

It was this same person who, when he appeared among men, told His

disciples that they should not be surprised if they too would be per­secuted and despised by men. He in fact predicted this and he told them that they were the salt of the earth and that they were to be lights as on a hill, but he said, "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is in Heaven. For so persecuted they the prophets who were before you."

The irony of Jesus Christ was that He lived in a moment of his‑

tory when the tombs of the prophets were decorated and the prophets were glorified and it was His painful task to point out to these people that their forefathers had killed those prophets. In other words, the word ugly is a question of who, when, why, where, and those who are called "ugly", others call "beautiful." Jesus Christ on the cross was not a beautiful sight, but it was a man much later in history, in the darkest of the Middle Ages who said, "Jesus, the very thought of Thee with sweetness fills my breast." And so it is possible for the

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same person to be both ugly and beautiful. Paul confessed in his letters that he was not beautiful to look upon. He apparently or quite possibly had some kind of eye disease that gave him an appearance of ugliness. And monks in the Middle Ages, we look back, we Protestants, through somewhat prejudiced vision, we look back at them as being ugly in many ways. And yet those men, who wore the same kind of cowls that our Junior Choir is wearing this morning,

and whom apparently were willing at least to that extent to imitate. Those men who crossed the dangerous roads of Europe, the paths‑before there were roads‑‑ in icy climates, dangerous frontiers where Vikings and other even worse savages raided. Those were the men who turned savages into the builders of cathedrals. Those were the ones who took those horsemen whose shaggy hair and murderous ways made them dreadful and ugly to the Romans and turned those people into the makers of stained glass windows. Their art was called "Gothic" in the early days as a derisive term by cultured Romans or those who considered

themselves successors to the Romans. But that derisive term "Gothic"

eventually became a designation which was respected. And that trans‑

ferrence from ugliness to beauty and of beauty to ugliness is one of

the cunning features as we look back down through history.

Figure the ugly politician. Who would that be? That would be

Lincoln. Lincoln, that ugly man, and yet whose words are worth more than those of any other American. That ugly man whose life was ended by a radical one evening, and I've heard it was said that the South lost the best friend they ever had because surely the Reconstruction policies of the North, embittered by Lincoln's death, were nowhere as gentle or as understanding as the policies that Lincoln himself would have carried out. I can recall the picture of Benito Juarez, that Indian of Mexico beclaimed by the gospel of Christ, who became the ruler of Mexico, a full‑blooded Indian who took with him into the capital city in his triumphal march only one possession, which was a large portrait of Lincoln carried on a donkey behind him as he rode into the city. There behind his desk hung that picture of Lincoln. Benito Juarez did not think Lincoln was ugly.

Major General Gowon, that leader of central government forces in Nigeria, who, during the strife of Biafra had a well‑thumbed1 dog­-eared book on his desk which was the life of Lincoln by Sandburg. He read those pages in midnight hours when other generals had gone to sleep and he pursued the policies of generosity after the war was over in a way that no one really expected. This General Gowon, head of Nigeria today, a Methodist minister's son, looked to the ugly poli­tician for illumination at a critical period in his country. And according to recent reports as to the recovery of Biafra, following no civil war in history, not even our own American Civil War, by a long shot, have the victors been as generous and as kindly, and as helpful and as forgiving to those who were defeated, as in the Nigerian war. And this, in Nigeria, in darkest Africa, in a country of 400 previously warring tribes, is a miracle; it is a phenomenon. And it is a change which has made an ugly situation beautiful.

Or take the ugly Puritan. Our schoolbooks today speak of their Salem witch trial with condemnation, and Cotton Mather as the ugly Puritan, the ugly minister who is pointed out as the problem. And yet a massive research at the University of Pennsylvania, a restudy of that Salem witch trial, has brought to light the fact that Cotton Mather, rather than being as the schoolbooks put him, a mean‑spirited witch burner, was actually the one man in that town with common sense and with insight and with scientific honesty as to the actual evi­dence against which they were dealing. And it is to those Puritan ministers that the credit must be given for stamping out this one instance in American history of this kind of phenomenon, whereas during the same century in Europe, not 19 people were killed as on these shores, but 250,000 women were put to death back in Europe. And it was the way the trial in the United States was handled by those Puritan ministers that gave confidence and new insight to the Europeans, according to British students of this event. And eventually put an end to witch burning in Europe as well. And yet, those who many people think of as ugly were actually those who were the most beautiful.

I think, then, finally of the phrase itself, "The Ugly Missionary".

When I went to Guatemala, I was an American university product who flinched a bit at the designation *"missionary".* It is a fact I confess. I don't see it this way now, but I look back upon those days when we were driving down through Mexico, that I sincerely wished that my pass­port did not read "missionary". I tell you this just by way of con­fession. I'm not sure whether you would agree with me at that point or not. I wonder how many of you here, if you were to wake up tomorrow morning and discover that by some fantastic process you had been trans­muted into a new career, a new profession and you had to go off to work at an office where you would be considered a missionary and that the rest of your career would designate you as a missionary. How would that fit with your perspective? In any case, I told those border officials that I was an anthropologist and later when I got my second passport, it read "Anthropologist" because after all my doctor's degree was in anthropology. This was a more advanced level of training than my ministerial training. Why not consider myself an anthropologist? But I soon found out that the border officials knew who missionaries were and highly respected them. Those who were ugly in this country were beautiful in Guatemala. They also knew who anthropologist were and they considered the anthropologists that they had known as "beat­niks."

And so it is that our anticipations of beauty or ugliness are often reversed. Joseph Kenyatta, that Mau‑Mau leader, who for many years was clapped in prison by the British and considered a most dangerous Communist. When they finally let him out and his Mau‑Mau party gained control of Kenya, everyone predicted that the missiona­ries would be soon sent from their country. And yet Kenyatta had considered those missionaries an asset, not a liability. The people who are absolutely refused visas to Kenya today under Kenyatta's government are not the missionaries but the communists. And in the recent vote in the parliament of Kenya someone actually proposed that missionaries be allowed to bring anything into the country duty‑free because their intentions were quite obviously favorable to the country and therefore everything should be done to facilitate their endeavors and their activities. Now that vote did not quite pass, but the very fact that it was brought up shows that what we consider ugly others may not.

There is in the history of South Africa the case which I'm sorry to report shows that missionaries were generally considered ugly. Missionaries were the ones despised and rejected by the colonists whose intentions seemed to be at variance with the purposes of the missionaries. One man, for example, Phillip, became the best-known, in fact the most…

**[Note: in the file for E16, there is a letter from theCalvary Presbyterian Church that notes that the tape ended before the sermon. This is where the typed, transcribed copy ends. Winter must have had an assistant type this into the computer, but did not ever make note of what he said at the end of the sermon.]**