

September 18, 2022
Pentecost 15, Proper 20 C
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Psalm 79
Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16: 1-13

I wanted to start this morning with just reflecting a bit on our tradition of our liturgy and reading of ancient texts and sharing a sacramental meal. Perhaps this is stating the obvious, but I want to address why we do this and what it brings to us. First of all, it is just good to be together as fellow disciples of Christ and share our journeys and encourage one another. We read scripture, our ancient texts, as foundational documents to guide us in our walk with Christ. I suppose it is not unlike how constitutional scholars study the Constitution and the various court cases that have helped interpret it to help inform and guide our way forward in an ever-changing world.

But I want to point out something else that this does for us.....in this ever-changing world where we can get obsessed with today's news and challenges, it helps us place ourselves in a context of much history and generations before who have struggled and found their way forward with the help of their community of faith, scripture, and God's grace. When we are hyperventilating about the dangers in the news, it is good to remind ourselves of the long history of challenges, missteps along the way, and God's faithfulness throughout. As we anticipate the funeral of Queen Elizabeth tomorrow and contemplate 70 years on the throne, this too reminds us of the goodness of continuity and traditions that help us to remember the wisdom of taking a deep breath and really understanding the words in the Lord's prayer, "give us this day, our daily bread." And the second half of our liturgy, the Eucharist, helps us to remember this also — daily bread, and mystically connected to Christ and all the generations who have ever lived!

So, on with the texts...which, truth be told, I would kind of like to ignore – especially the gospel! This morning’s readings start with another cheerful passage from the prophet Jeremiah – “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick”! Lo these many weeks we have been making our way through the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Throughout our journey we have been continuously warned of the coming doom, most particularly in light of the geo-politics of the day and the impending doom that would eventually come through the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar.

In the passage this morning we actually hear several voices interwoven: the prophet’s and Yahweh/God’s. The verse, “the harvest is passed and the summer is ended, and we are not saved” may ring particularly true for us in this season---both literally in terms of the change of seasons, and politically-- as we struggle through the attempted coup and scandals of the last administration and prepare for another election! But knowing the agricultural seasons of Palestine sheds some further insight.....grain harvest was in the spring, and then various other fruits would be in the summer. If the grain harvest failed, then the fruit harvest would be the hope to ward off starvation.....ergo, “the harvest is passed and the summer is ended, and we are not saved”. The hope for the next season is where I have put my trust and expectation.....and the lottery ticket I bought on Saturday. ‘My ship is coming in, I can just feel it’. And of course in Jeremiah’s time, his criticism of his people was that their hope was principally on making the right bet on being a vassal state to one of 2 larger neighboring kingdoms---Pharaoh in Egypt, or Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. Jeremiah’s message was of course, that their proper ‘king’ was Yahweh – that should have been where they focused hope.

But what I really want to focus on this morning is this parable Jesus tells about the ‘shrewd steward’, alternately the ‘dishonest steward’ – interesting how commentators have used both to name this parable! This is definitely a head scratcher. Why on earth would Jesus be telling us to emulate such a manipulative, conniving, scoundrel? The Roman emperor Julian (361-363), nephew of Constantine the first, who converted to Christianity and the whole empire with him, famously used this passage of Luke as part of his reason for leaving the faith. He said this proved that Jesus was just a normal man, who taught selfishness.

But at closer examination this is the kind of story that really proves that Jesus was definitely in the company of traditional ‘wisdom teachers’ of

the ancient Near East. This parable was meant to shock and cause people to think. The parable tells the tale of a rich man who discovers his manager is 'squandering his property'. We are not told how, and one wonders if he was playing fast and loose with the rich man's money, and hiding his misdeeds in fancy paperwork.

Now this manager is no idiot. He quickly figures out how he can make hay even while he is being shown the door. He goes to people who are indebted to the rich man and works with them to doctor the invoices that show they do not owe as much. He figures that if he does them a favor then maybe they will do him a favor when he is looking for a job. The rich man finds out and commends the manager for his shrewdness.....and Jesus adds – 'for the children of this age are more shrewd than the children of light'. And then this truly enigmatic phrase "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

OK, bear with me here.....In life we are given opportunities to secure income, property, and our general security. Shrewd people really know how to work economic systems to their advantage. They spend time and energy on figuring it out, taking measured risks, and reaping the rewards of their 'dishonest wealth'. And here I need to say that 'dishonest wealth', translated as 'mammon' in the King James version of the Bible, really is a reference to the general lust for the wealth of this world. Jesus is encouraging his followers to have the same kind of shrewd and clever desire for 'heavenly reward' as for those who seek earthly reward. He also begins to outline an ethic for our relationship to wealth and money, which is echoed in so many of his sayings, like in Matthew 6: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal."

Why is it, he asks, in our daily life we can put so much effort into working the angles for things that are ultimately passing away and to which others will ultimately inherit, but when it comes to our spiritual life we so easily wave the white flag of surrender, and with a yawn, we say, "oh well, what will be will be; I go to church on Sunday – isn't that good

enough?" And rather than some kind of other-worldly pietism that would have us just sit back and discount the importance of the material aspects of life, Jesus seems to be encouraging us to be engaged with the things of life and even with developing and using our resources, but just to be sure that we don't become enslaved to them for their own sake, and more importantly, to use it for good! "You cannot serve God and wealth."

My grandfather was an insurance salesman and a devout Methodist. He read his Bible every day. I still have that Bible that has his handwritten notes all the way through it in the margins---I could tell he really read and studied it. I think he understood this message because he worked hard to provide for his family (with some good stories from the Depression era), but always kept his eyes on how he could use what he had for the better of others and the community. He had priorities straight, but he did like to joke that though 'the love of money is the root of all evil' (1 Tim 6:10), he followed quickly with, 'but it certainly can calm the nerves!'

So where are we? What is our relationship with money and the things of this world? Does it just 'calm the nerves', or has it become the center of our life? Do we use what we have been given for the greater good? Have we really internalized a spirituality that everything comes from God and we are meant to be good stewards and use our resources wisely....as in the offering phrase: "All things come of thee O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee." When we do so, we will be welcomed into our 'eternal home' as in the gospel.

And, I believe, Jesus' message in this parable is telling us to be engaged and be clever with what we have been given, but just make sure it is for good purposes; and make sure we do not set our hearts upon material wealth, because, we cannot serve God and money both. This teaching is nicely summarized in the collect for this Sunday: Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure