

Proper 20, Pentecost 15, Year C
Luke 16:1-13
September 22, 2019
St. John's Chula Vista

In the name of Jesus, who would have us be faithful in the smallest of things. Amen

Well...I guess I got lucky with the lessons again today, didn't I? I have to admit that as I first read them, I was stymied as to what connected these specific readings...after all...what does Jeremiah—or is it God?—"weeping day and night" have to do with the final sentence of the Gospel, with which we're all so familiar: "You cannot serve God and wealth." I'm not sure I know, even yet, but I'm willing to share my musings.

In our opening lesson, we again eavesdrop on Jeremiah and God in dialogue...and today it feels almost as though we're violating a secret meeting or one that's meant only for the two in conversation, doesn't it? How great the grief! How great the lamentations! Now there's a word we rarely hear these days in our western, first world lives, isn't it? Lamentation...it's a term that evokes thoughts of an extreme depth of anguish and suffering...the very kind of anguish and suffering both Jeremiah and God feel for Jerusalem and the people of Judah who won't turn aside from their sinfulness and wrong doing...a people who won't allow themselves to be healed, won't allow themselves to be turned...or re-turned...to their loving God. These are a people who've been given all they need to live justly and with righteousness with God and each other, but they've instead chosen to continually stray from God's directed path...to the extent that they've become lost...so lost that Jeremiah is now praying...asking God...even in the midst of God's divine sorrow...to help them yet find their way back into covenantal relationship.

And speaking of straying from God's path, not living justly and with righteousness with God and each other...today we also spend time in the company of that shrewd business manager in the Gospel...he'd been caught red-handed, so to speak...notice he doesn't bother to deny the charges of squandering the rich man's property...but sets about putting a plan of action in place to secure a decent living for himself once he's sacked, by doing "favors" for those who owed his employer debts.

Now the commentaries are divided on what happens next...some believe he was continuing to cheat his master, while others believe he was reducing the amount of his percentage of the debt...his fee or commission, so to speak. Based upon the verse, "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly;" I'm going with the group who propose that the manager made "friends" of the debtors, became their patron in a way, by decreasing his cut of the monies owed, thereby ensuring a warm welcome with those whom he'd aided, once he'd lost his position.

The manager now faced with a life-changing crisis, thought "outside the box" in order to make his decision on how best to survive it, and then resolutely carried through on his plan...an action commended by the property owner. The manager was certainly shrewd! He's been smart enough to discern his own situation and come up with a "survival plan"...a plan that ultimately benefits all involved as the rich man will get what he's owed, the manager will buy "good will" and those in debt to the rich man will live better because their debt is reduced.

But the corrupt steward has discovered something else...the money he'd worshipped thus far in his life couldn't buy him security...there's something now much more important to him

Proper 20, Pentecost 15, Year C
Luke 16:1-13
September 22, 2019
St. John's Chula Vista

than that money...and in this discovery, he ends up becoming the manager he should have been all along...he takes risks, makes deals that benefit he, his master, and the debtors—and this is the crux of Jesus' message to his followers—those first disciples and to us today...be the faithful manager you CAN be on God's behalf!

Wealth of any kind is both a blessing and a responsibility. The amount involved is immaterial—we're to be faithful stewards, no matter how much...no matter how little. We're to live a fully integrated life of good stewardship...not just on Sundays, not just when we have dealings with our fellow congregants, our fellow Christians, our fellow Americans. We're to be faithful in our dealings with the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed...or with the rich and famous.

Luke enjoins us to not become enslaved to the idolatry of money. But I think there's more lurking here than just our easy slip into the worship of riches. I think we're also to be conscious of the sin associated with such practices, lest we, like Jeremiah's community in Judah stray so far from God's path that we become lost beyond recall. "You cannot serve God and wealth."

I'm confident that each of us here would undoubtedly answer that we're not like Judah or more particularly, the dishonest steward—we wouldn't knowingly squander the property of our employers through theft or hoarding, nor would we tack on undo fees as a commission to our work. And certainly we'd be affronted if anyone were to suggest that we live to cheat others at every opportunity.

But are we really as blameless here as we'd like to think we are? At the very heart of matters, if we accept and believe that all we have is truly a gift from God, than anything we claim as "ours" is really, in a way, a current equivalent to the steward's dishonest wealth, isn't it? The wealth of our lives and our world really doesn't belong to us as individuals...we're simply the stewards "working" for God in this world. And how are we doing that work? Are we, like Judah, participating not only in individual or private sins, but also in corporate or public sin? God and Jeremiah aren't crying a fountain of tears because one individual was dishonest...no...it's because, as a nation the culture has fostered, approved, and thrived upon practices that oppress, damage, and injure the vulnerable. We're reminded that the people of God shouldn't behave in this way to their neighbors, no matter what their social location. A message as painfully true today as it was in ancient Judah or first century Jerusalem.

I think this is also the message of Jesus' cryptic passage, "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." I think Jesus is speaking of the wealth that was taken dishonestly from the poor and vulnerable through the prevalent cultural practices of his day—of our day?—and he was instructing the disciples to, like the shrewd steward, keep less for themselves and give back more to those from whom it was being taken dishonestly. To do so would then, as it will today, help bring about the Kingdom of God.

Our lesson from I Timothy reminds us that we're also to pray faithfully for our society and those who govern it, for "This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who

Proper 20, Pentecost 15, Year C
Luke 16:1-13
September 22, 2019
St. John's Chula Vista

desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." This is another way in which we can further the in-breaking of the Kingdom—helping to bring about change through our prayers and intercessions.

Because we're inextricably part of the culture in which we live, we're equally inextricably linked to the sin of that culture. But we don't have to make the sin of the culture our personal, individual sins. I think that's the underlying message of today's lessons—as God's people, we live in a sinful culture, but we don't have to actively participate in that sin...in fact, we can...through Christ's intervention in our lives...act faithfully toward God and our neighbors, thereby furthering the coming of God's Kingdom where we are, as we live the change we want to see in others and the culture around us.

Thankfully, we don't have to live as though there is "no balm in Gilead" or as if there is no healing available to us. For just as the shrewd steward discovered...there ARE other possibilities open to us through God and God's divine path...and those possibilities will benefit not only us as individuals, but also the wider community.

Let us bear in mind the assertion attributed to St. Augustine: God gave us people to love and things to use, and original sin manifests itself in our penchant to confuse those two, loving things and using people.

Today, come to the table and both acknowledge...and leave there...your part in the corporate sin that surrounds and degrades us...be fed and strengthened to live faithfully and counter-culturally, so that you, too, may recognize the possibilities that God is offering you...not only to live your life in a new, better manner, but in a new, better manner that will further the coming of the Kingdom of God. Amen.