

SLD09.23.07 25th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Jeremiah 8:18-19:1
Luke 16:1-13

This morning Jeremiah isn't beating up on his people, nor God through him. This morning Jeremiah stands *with* his people and just...grieves.

“My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.”

Today, as he listens to the plaintive cries of his people

“The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” (choir)

This morning a lot of fire has gone out of Jeremiah. His head hurts and his heart hurts...

“For the hurt of my poor people, I am hurt.”

This morning Jeremiah offers no answers, no adamant advice, no relentless reminders of the peoples' apostasy. Today he just stands with his people and presses the question we all want to know:

“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?”

Today Jeremiah simply stand with his people...and weeps.

Turn with me now to the words of another discouraged leader, Jesus of Nazareth. And I'm talking about, I need you to turn *with* me. As in, please stand *with* me on this one and instead of looking up here expecting me to lay the ungarbled word on you. Because the passage Lectionary serves up this morning is weird and convoluted and frankly, I'm not entirely sure what to make of it. In case you think preachers and leaders always know what they're talking about, this is a good

opportunity to disabuse you of that notion. So as far as I'm concerned, you and I need to be in this one together. Any ideas come to you as to what Jesus or Luke, either one, is getting at this morning, you let me know.

All right, so, the passage opens with Jesus talking not the masses now but to his disciples – you know, the people who know him a little and choose to follow him. Only after this little trope, they might have had some second thoughts.

Right, so in Luke 16: 1-13, Jesus has this story to tell his disciples:

Luke 16: 1-13 (slightly modified)

“There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So the rich man summoned the manager and said to him, **‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’**

Then the manager says to himself, **‘Hmmm. What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.’**” (start walking around like you're thinking.)

Okay so far, right. A rich man calls to account the unreliable steward of his estate, and, now that the steward's busted, he starts scheming about how to deal with the situation. He considers his options. Apparently they're limited. Manual labor or begging on the streets, neither of which appeal. Then a light bulb goes off. This manager may be untrustworthy but he ain't dumb.

“ I know what I can do! I've got it figured out how to get people to welcome me into their homes after I'm fired!”

And so the clever manager proceeds with his plan to take care of himself, if not his master's assets. Summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asks the first one,

“How much do you owe my master?”

And the debtor answers, **“A hundred jugs of olive oil.”**

So the manager says to the debtor,

“Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.”

In other words, reduce your debt to my master by half.

Then the manager asks another of his master's debtors

“And how much do you owe?”

And the debtor replies, **“A hundred containers of wheat.”**

And the manager says, **“Take your bill and make it eighty.”**

Or, reduce what you pay to my master by twenty percent.

All right, so, even if we don't approve of the manager's actions, so far we understand their motivation, right? And maybe even appreciate his cunning? Certainly he's setting things up for himself in the event he gets canned.

“When I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes!”

Now...how do you suppose the boss reacts when he hears what his steward has done? Outrage, right? Here his manager has swindled him again?!

But no (and this is where the first confusing part comes in) the master actually *commends* the dishonest manager because he's acted shrewdly! Can you believe that? Never mind that that the manager manipulated the books, *and* the debtors, blatantly reducing accounts receivable; yet the master *commends* the cad for cleverly turning the situation to his favor! Is this making sense to you?

Recall that this is the same master who calls the manager to task in the first place, and threatens to fire him, because he's heard he's squandering his money! Now squandering is clever? Now dishonesty is acceptable, even commendable???

The master goes on to say, **“for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”**

And this is a *good* thing? Clearly “shrewdness” ranks pretty high to this master, even when it's used against him. Just who *is* this master, anyway?

And the “the children of this age” – who are they? The steward and the debtors? And the “the children of light.” Who or what are the children of light?

Determined to find out, I really labored over this one. Dusted off my Greek New Testament, shoveled from the basement of my mind the decomposing remnants of the Greek alphabet, and scoured both Baur's Greek-English lexicon and Bromiley's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. After which, I have two things to say: first, clearly neither of these guys is a single mom trying to run a church; and second, way down at the very bottom of page 1296, on the very last line, in little bitty print, Bromiley offers this: “believers are children of light.”

“Believers are children of light.” Took me an hour and a half to find that little pearl and I don't have that kind of time, do you? But maybe, I'm thinking, maybe that little pearl will help make some sense of this nutty parable. I mean, what are we supposed to hear when the master, commending the manager, doesn't contrast him with other managers, doesn't contrast him with other swindlers, but contrasts him over against “children of light!” Against “believers!” Against people who profess faith in Jesus Christ? What is *that* all about?!

Sounds to me like Jesus is saying, in effect, “man, people in the church (children of light) are so clueless! People outside the church (children of this age) are so much more savvy! So much more street smart! So much more ‘with it!’”

Now I know most of us under the age of 60 have heard that before, but seriously, not from Jesus!

And as if that isn’t confusing enough, in today’s passage the master goes on to advise the manager, **“I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth...”**

Do you hear that? “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth....” According to scripture this is Jesus talking.... Go on.

“Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that, when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

Okay, I’m struggling with this. Make friends for yourselves via dishonest wealth so...what?

“So when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

Helpful “take aways” for a Sunday morning sermon, don’t you think?

One: it’s okay to squander someone else’s property so long as you’re clever about it. And two: be sure and make friends with your dishonest wealth with so later they can watch your back.

Can you see why I need you alongside me on this one?

Okay, so, we’re not done. .

Next the master/God/Jesus/Luke/whoever goes on to remark that **“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very**

little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?"

Does anybody else think this is moving dangerously in the direction of – if you can't trust the Mafia to support the church, who *can* you trust?! If you have not been faithful with dishonest wealth? Is anybody else struggling here as much as I am?

Now, when I'm stuck I generally turn to one of two commentaries – the solons of Candler School of Theology or the divines of Columbia Seminary. In this case, I turned to both.

Candler suggested that the dishonesty of the manager is unrelated to the focus of the story but listeners might need a little help being assured of this.¹ Ya think? I know / do.

What's more, suggest the solons of Candler, a good bit of the madness of this pericope is associated, not with Jesus' actual parable, but with Luke's spin on it.

Okay, I can buy that. I put a spin on everything I write; why shouldn't Luke? But where do you suppose Jesus' parable ends and Luke's spin begins?

Candler says right after the master commends the manager, with that children of light stuff and everything following about being friendly to others with your stolen loot. That's all Lukan spin.

Which interpretation keeps Jesus clean of weird advice mongering only if you buy Candler's *second* proposition which is this: that "the debtors don't know the manager has been fired, thinks the reductions in their debts are legitimate, and praise

¹ Preaching Through the Christian Year, Craddock, Hayes, Holladay, Tucker, Trinity Press, Valley Forge, Pa., 1994, p.415.

the owner for his generosity, who then in turn, basking in his new found popularity, commends his swindling steward.” Can you go for that?

Or, option two, the Columbia divines who are a little more circumspect in their interpretation, acknowledging from the get-go that the “parable of the unjust steward” has baffled interpreters since the beginning of time.” (Thank you.) Therefore, says Columbia, “...Preachers are urged to consult the critical commentaries.... “ Okay.... “But be forewarned,” they say, “the commentaries do not agree among themselves how the passage is to be read.”²

Do you have any idea how lonely a preacher can get of a Saturday night?

Meanwhile, seemingly from out of nowhere, the master concludes today’s speech with

“for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. “

Which somehow, Candler concludes, is what this whole text is really all about - how we’re meant to handle possessions - even if this aphorism does happen to fall smack at the end of Luke’s spin.

“No slave can serve two masters; You cannot serve God and wealth.”

I don’t know. I wouldn’t needlepoint it on any pillows.

I mean, hailing as I do from a long line of Scottish Presbyterians, it’s not that I’m against savvy management of financial resources - I’m just not getting such a clear bead on Jesus’ main point here. Perhaps, as the folks at Columbia say, the text, “raises serious questions both about our attitude toward money, our subtle (and sometimes not

² Texts for Preaching, Cousar, Gaventa, McCann, Newsome, Westminster JohnKnox Press, Louisville, Ky., 1994, p.525.

so subtle) attachments, and also about the manner in which we give to (charity.)

(p.526)

But for me it raises other questions as well - like about the clarity of Jesus' teaching, the reliability of Luke's theology, and the wisdom of the discipline of following lectionary in the first place.

At the same time, tackling this text leaves me with a sort of poignant gratitude toward Jesus' first disciples, who stuck with him even when they didn't have a clue what he was talking about. I feel grateful, too, for *your* earnest and forgiving attention during this equally puzzling "preaching moment." I wish I could do better for you. But in this, as in so many ambiguous issues and challenges before us as a church, sometimes the best we can do is look at them together, you and I, with open minds and seeking hearts, and a shared confidence in a God who, though perennially beyond our understanding, remains a good and generous and forgiving master. That, and remember that we're in this together. Right?

To the glory of God. Amen.