

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

Proper 20C
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
September 18, 2022
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God at the Center

My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Jeremiah's lament is indeed heartbreaking. Not the easiest scripture to start our beautiful Sunday morning with. I think Jeremiah's lament is hard for us because many or most of us have felt like that and we don't necessarily want to be taken back there. The death of a spouse, a sibling, a child or a dear friend, the loss of a job or a scary diagnosis, all these things can leave us heartsick and wondering where is God in this? Is the Lord not in Zion?

Jeremiah didn't want to be a prophet, you know. He was a young priest in a town near Jerusalem when God called him to his prophetic role. It's hard to be a prophet because your job usually consists of pointing out people's character failings – usually idolatry – and condemning them for it. And as you might imagine, condemnation and criticism do not make a person popular! Do you remember Jesus saying: "Truly I tell you a prophet is not welcome in his own hometown?"¹ He might have been thinking of Jeremiah. Just as the people of Nazareth wanted to throw Jesus off the cliff, Jeremiah's people wanted to kill him too. King Zedekiah even had all Jeremiah's prophetic scrolls burned. Yep, it's hard to be a prophet, and today Jeremiah seems utterly exhausted by his job. Where is God in this? Is the Lord not in Zion?

As hard as it seemed, God called Jeremiah to speak the truth he saw all around him. I think God calls us to do that too. Jeremiah saw idolatry consuming his people, idolatry he knew would lead to their destruction. I think that's true for us too – we see idolatry – in our world, in our country, maybe even in our family, our friends or ourselves. And somewhere inside ourselves, we know how destructive that is. Putting anything other than God at the center of our lives, be it success or popularity or addiction or money or power or privilege or prominence, will always lead to destruction... maybe not the destruction of our physical lives, but perhaps the destruction of our relationships, our peace of mind and heart, or even our souls. Jeremiah's people didn't need God to wipe them out, they were wiping their own selves out and Jeremiah told them so. They were suffering because they did not love God first and best. They were suffering because they didn't care about their neighbors. And it will be the end of them, Jeremiah says.

I think it's true for us too. Oh I don't mean we need to be perfect or holier than the person in the pew in front of us or that we need to do something someone else might prescribe for us. Our desire to have God at the center of our lives, and nurturing that desire, makes God's heart sing, I'm quite sure. One of my most beloved spiritual teachers, Thomas Merton said *My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in*

¹Luke 4:24

*fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire...*² It's important to start from where we are. If wishing we wanted to want God at the center of our lives is where we are, that's right where God wants to meet us.

Some of you have heard me say I am far too tender for this work I've been called to. And I think that's partly why God calls me to this work. I think it might have been why God called Jeremiah to his work too. He was a most reluctant prophet who took no pleasure in proclaiming the destruction of his people. And even as he spoke the truth of what he saw all around him, he was heartsick about it. "For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt. I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me." Like Mary at the foot of the cross, Jeremiah refuses to turn away from the suffering right in front of him. We need to do that too in order to take our place in lightening the suffering of the world. As hard as it is to look, we must.

While you might not see it at first glance, our gospel story is also about seeing and abating suffering, both for ourselves and our neighbors. The parable today is really a continuation of the lost and found stories last week. We don't get the next story in Luke's gospel, the beautiful story of the prodigal son. Instead, we skip right to the very confusing parable about the "dishonest manager." This is a hard parable! Thankfully, I ran into Brian McLaren as I made my way through my studies this week, and so I have a far more satisfying understanding than ever before, and I hope we can make meaning of this strange story, together.

This week, Jesus is in trouble again with the Pharisees. Last week, he was breaking Jewish law by eating with unclean people. The Pharisees, who strove to live exemplary lives, got stuck on the uncleanness and missed the point of God's radical inclusion and extravagant love. This week, it's not the law that gets in the way, it's money. The Pharisees loved money and gave it more power and value than was good for them, or anybody around them. Can you imagine it?

But even knowing that, it's still hard to make sense of this parable. A lying, cheating manager is congratulated for his shrewdness in cheating, by the man he is cheating. Then Jesus seems to do the same. What? As usual, we need some context and some understanding of first century Palestinian economics in order to make sense of this story. First, we need to remember that the context of every story in the gospels, is the Roman occupation. As occupiers do, the Romans exploited both human labor and natural resources. They did it with taxes. The system was set up in such a way that the rich people paid a very small portion of their income in taxes and the poor people paid, or tried to, a very large portion of their income in taxes. Can you imagine it?

Rome occupied the northern agricultural territory around Galilee, where wine, wheat and olive oil – staples in the Roman economy - were grown and produced. Rome also occupied the southern territory, Judea, where the temple was and where all the rich people lived. The poor people of Galilee were taxed beyond their ability to pay. So when they couldn't pay their taxes, rich people from the south came to the rescue. *Don't worry, they said, we'll pay your taxes in exchange for the deed to your land. We won't take your land, you can still live on it and farm it and all you have to do is give us a percentage of your wheat, wine and olive oil – we'll send our*

² Merton, Thomas. *Thoughts on Solitude* p.79

managers to collect it. So the managers went north, collected the wheat, wine and oil, brought it back to the rich people who sold it to the Romans at a very high price. And the rich people got richer and the poor people got poorer. Can you imagine it?

The rich man decided to fire the manager because the manager didn't bring back enough wheat, wine and oil for the rich man to sell to the Romans. I wonder if the rich man ever considered the fact that he was about to destroy the manager's life? I wonder how long that manager had worked for the rich man? The manager knows he's too old for manual labor, so I'm guessing he'd worked a very long time for him. He's too old for manual labor and he's too proud to beg and he has just come to realize that to this rich man, he is nothing more than a commodity to be used up and thrown away.

And that's when he decided to change sides. All that loyalty he'd given to the rich man would be so much more valuable, so much more appreciated, so much more fruitful if he offered it to the poor people. And so he did. "How much do you owe? Cut it in half. How much do you owe? Take back 20%. And you, what do you owe?" You get the picture. Oh he still collected wheat, wine and oil for the rich man, but he did it in a way that helped the poor people. It was the beginning of a shift from an economy in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, to God's economy where richness is defined not in dollars and cents, but in a changed world.

Of course, we will continue to use money and there is nothing wrong with that. It's the way we use money that Jesus wants us to think about. How do you use your money? If you were to look at your bank accounts or your credit card accounts or your investment accounts, would they reflect what you say you value most? Our culture values accumulation, success, power and wealth above human kindness, relationship and loving our neighbors as though they were our very own selves. Jesus says we will either hate God and love money, or love money and hate God. We can say that's hyperbole but that may be at our own peril.

If we are of God, we will value one another, not as a means to any sort of end, but as precious sisters and brothers, beloved of God. When we put God at the center of our lives and let everything flow from that, our values will become crystal clear and we will be able to take our part in loving the world back into wholeness. When we put God at the center of our lives, we will value relationship over exploitation of people and resources. When we put God at the center of our lives, love becomes the law. Love of God, love of God's people, love of God's creation – these relationships are the riches of the Kingdom. Of course that doesn't make sense in our culture. But then leaving your whole flock to find one renegade sheep doesn't make sense. Staying up all night crawling around on your hands and knees looking for one lousy coin doesn't make sense. Throwing a party for a very bad behaving son who only came back because he was starving doesn't make sense. Turning the other cheek doesn't make sense. But in God's economy, in God's economy, nothing makes better sense. Amen