

On Being Thoroughly Used Up  
Luke 16: 1-13  
Jeremiah 8:8-21; 9:  
Preached by Dr. Cahill  
Babcock Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, September 18, 2016

This morning's assigned lectionary readings are from the Prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament and Luke's Gospel in the New Testament. Let's begin with Jeremiah, the weeping prophet.

Jeremiah lived at the time of the Babylonian invasion of Judah in 586 BC. He was a Cassandra, forever giving dire warnings to God's disobedient people but they never listened because they never liked what Jeremiah was saying.

In this morning's passage, Jeremiah wept God's tears over Judah's self-destruction. You can sense God's angst pulsating through the written word:

"How can you say, "We are wise, and the law of God is with us when... the false pen of the scribes made it a lie? The wise will be put to shame...since they have rejected the Word of the Lord.

"Therefore, I will give their wives to others and their fields to their conquerors, because... everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest, everyone deals flawlessly.

"They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace peace when there is no peace...

"Why have they (the people) provoked me to anger with their images and... foreign idols? Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" (Selected verses from Jeremiah: 8)

Jeremiah paints in bold colors the broken relationship between God and the Chosen People. Believing they could claim Abraham as their father and the covenant made with Moses their insurance policy, they conned themselves into thinking all was well.

But by choosing the path of cheap grace, they kicked God to the curb. Wanting to keep up with the Joneses, they became just like their pagan neighbors. They gladly embraced the first half of that verse in Deuteronomy, "the poor will always be with you," but completely disregard the second half, giving them the responsibility of caring for widows and orphans.

Jeremiah's angst bursts into a full flower with the question, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my people not been restored?" (Jeremiah 8:22)

Five hundred years ago later, the Good Physician came to earth bringing the healing balm Jeremiah was craving. Like the prophets before him, Jesus found God's people just as obstinate but at least they learned their lesson about chasing after pagan gods. Unfortunately, the pendulum swung to the other extreme. The religious establishment stridently rejected all things foreign and insisted on complete devotion to God, but they had a myopic vision of God, and themselves. Like all of us, they liked to think they were righteous. Like some of us, they became puffed up and forgot God required them to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

Jesus primary mission to earth was to die for the sins of the world. His secondary mission: prepare the people for the coming of God's kingdom but Jesus hit a brick wall with the Temple Priests, scribes and Pharisees. Initially Jesus used parables to coax them back into the fold.

As you know, these parables were simple and straightforward but today's parable leaves us confused. So, from the start, let's be clear: Jesus wasn't condoning dishonesty. Instead, Jesus was drawing a sharp distinction between two oppositional groups of people: The Children of this Age and the Children of the Light who live according to the Sermon on the Mount. Finally, even though worldly ways are sometimes dishonest, the Children of Light can learn from worldly peoples their fierce commitment to set and reach goals, no matter what it takes.

Something else to consider: each of the characters in this parable, the steward, the farmers, the merchants and the steward's master are all cut from the same cloth. Each is ready to wheel and deal to get what he wants. Funny thing, even though the master is the victim of the steward's dishonesty, his true character is exposed when he expresses admiration for his steward's ability to make lemonade out of lemons.

In twenty-five words or less this is the lesson of this parable: God's people are expected to be as determined and creative in their discipleship as the unscrupulous Children of this World are in their deal making.

Jesus put it even more succinctly when he said, "Be as wise as serpents but as gentle as doves."

Let's review the parable so we can not only understand it but just as important, put it into practice.

The master found out his steward was either incompetent or an embezzler so the steward was given a pink slip, but not before the Master told the steward to close the books and report back to him.

Now when the steward was fired, he went into panic mode, wondering what would become of him. Ever resourceful, the steward quickly recovered and got creative. Calling on his master's debtors, one by one, to their delight, he gave them an offer they couldn't refuse. Each only had to pay a portion of the money owed. Why so generous with his master's money? Because now the debtors were indebted to him and it was understood the steward expected payback.

Word about this got back to the master. Instead of being furious, he was impressed. You can hear him congratulating the steward. "You, clever dog. You always land on your feet! I need someone like you to manage my property. Too bad I can't trust you anymore!"

Jesus then gave a summation of the parable. "He who is faithful in very little is faithful in much and he who is dishonest and little is dishonest and much if then you have not been faithful... who will entrust you with your riches... no servant can serve two masters, he will either hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (Luke 16:10-13)

Simply put, Jesus said if you can be counted on to carry out small tasks, you will be trusted with bigger ones. An entry level employee who does his job well will be promoted and given even greater responsibilities.

But there's more. Speaking in the context of eternity, Jesus is also declaring whatever you accomplish for good in this world has eternal implications for you and the ones you help in this world and the next.

Here's the inevitable hard question: what type of steward do you want to be? Dishonest, squandering your master's wealth for your own good, or faithful by carefully managing everything given over to your care for the greater good?

To keep us on the straight and narrow, let's repeat Jesus warning, "No servant can serve two masters... you cannot serve God and wealth." You have to choose between living only for yourself or using your influence by living for Christ and your neighbor.

Now comes the application. I have to say something thought-provoking to excite you enough to start thinking creatively about expanding your vision of discipleship. My text isn't from the Good Book or even a quote from one of the saints.

George Bernard Shaw was a three thinker with an antagonistic attitude towards organized religion. Even so, he had a firm understanding of Jesus' ethic of love and service in the world. Listen to what he wrote just over one hundred years ago:

"This is the true joy of life, being used out for a purpose recognized by you as a mighty one that comes from being a force of nature, instead of a feverish, selfish, little clot of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community and as long as I live, it is my responsibility to do for it what I can. I want to be thoroughly used up by the time I die, where the harder I work

the more I live... Life is no brief candle to me, it's sort of a splendid torch... which I want to make burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

Shaw wasn't a believer but he sure had a grasp on the purpose of life. "My life belongs to the community...I want to be thoroughly used up it is my responsibility to do for it when I can."

If he could say that surely we can say, "My life belongs to God and the community God places me in it and I want to be thoroughly used up, it's my responsibility to do what I can."

Realizing you belong to God is a good start. Saying you also belong to the community and want to be thoroughly used up for it makes it stick. Belief in God with no commitment to the community is a nonstarter. You can't have one without the other.

"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

That's the blueprint for Christian discipleship. It begins with being just, loving, kind and humble. It continues by being creative and resourceful, taking risks and turning away from being a feverish, selfish, little clots of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will do not devote itself to making you happy. As long as we live, our responsibility is to do for God, and our neighbor, whatever we can until we are thoroughly used up by the time we die.

That's a great description of Christian discipleship. Let's promise each other we'll do our best to put it into practice.