

“Trusted With Little”

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 (O.T. Lesson)

Luke 16:1-13 (Gospel Lesson)

If you have read much from Jeremiah, you probably never considered him to be Mr. Fun/Happy guy. In our Old Testament Lesson this morning Jerry is pleading with God to save his people. Were they really his people? His grief is over the fact that they, the people, were rejecting God. Can we make the same comparisons today for all those turning away from God?

The Prophet is responding with anguish to a world dying in sin. We watch the same world still dying in sin—still rejecting God. But how often do our hearts break for our lost friends and neighbors, our lost world? Only when we have Jeremiah’s kind of passionate concern will we be moved to reach out. We must begin by asking God to break our hearts for the world He loves.

This, of course isn’t something new—it’s not a new problem—people have been rejecting God and His teaching going all the way back to Adam and Eve. You remember them, don’t you? The great fall! Adam blamed Eve—Eve blamed the serpent—and the serpent didn’t have a leg to stand on.

Gilead was famous for its healing medicine. Our United Methodist Hymnal contains a hymn, *There Is a Balm in Gilead* (UMH #375). The refrain goes like this: “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.”

What is sin? Who determines what a sin is? Why does sin bother God? Sin makes the soul sick and distances it from God. God wants us to come closer—not move farther away. One more question: What is the opposite of love? I know, you're going to say hatred. The opposite of love is sin.

Jeremiah asks a rhetorical question about healing. The obvious answer is yes—God could heal them—but Israel was applying the “medicine;” they just weren't obeying the Lord. Although the people's spiritual sickness was still very deep, it could be healed. But the people refused the medicine. God could heal their self-inflicted wounds, but we wouldn't force His healing on them.

Luke text

There's an old story about a young man in Montana who bought a horse from a farmer for \$100. The farmer agreed to deliver the horse the next day. However, when the next day arrived the farmer reneged on his promise. “I'm afraid the horse is dead,” he explained. The young man said, “Well, then give me my money back.” And the farmer said, “Can't do that, I spent it already.”

The young man thought for a moment and said, “Ok, then, just bring me the dead horse.” The farmer asked, “What you gonna do with a dead horse?” The young man said, “I'm going to raffle it off.” The farmer said, “You can't raffle off a dead horse!” The young man said, “Sure I can. Watch me. I just won't tell anybody he's dead.”

A month later, the farmer met up with the young man and asked,

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“What happened with the dead horse?” The young man said, “I raffled him off. I sold 500 tickets at two dollars apiece and made a profit of \$998...” The

farmer said, “Didn’t anyone complain?” The young man said, “Just the guy who won. So, I gave him his two dollars back.”

That my friends is an enterprising young man—a man who could think quick on his feet so to speak. But we might go even further and consider him to be something of a con man. There’s something about a con man that captures the imagination.

We glamorize con men, but the truth is they take advantage of weak and unsuspecting people. I suspect God despises con men and con women. However, for more than 2000 years conscientious people of faith have struggled with this parable that is our Gospel Lesson this morning—but that’s exactly what Jesus intended—or at least I think He did. You see, I think Jesus wanted His listeners to puzzle over His teachings—as He wants us to do as well. He wants us to stretch our minds and our spirits. This is, after all, how we grow. Let’s face it; many people have a very superficial faith to which they have never given more than a couple of minutes of thought in their entire lives.

Now, let me tell you another story. A middle-aged man was in trouble with his boss. In fact, he had already been given his pink slip. In a few days he would be finished—out the door. The man was mortified. He knew at his age in life it would be difficult to find another job, particularly at the pay scale to which he had grown accustomed. Unemployment benefits would keep

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his family going for a while, but what would he do when they ran out? He was facing disaster.

Then he came up with a sure-fire plan. He was in charge of collections for his company. In the short time he had remaining with his employer, he decided to call each of his employers' creditors and offer them a deal. He was leaving his current position, he said to them, to find a new opportunity. In order to keep their good will he was offering them a deal they could not refuse. If they paid their bills immediately, they could settle for 60 cents on the dollar. Of course, he assured them with his fingers crossed that he had been authorized to make them this offer. And he hoped they would remember this act of good will when he came to their company to submit his resume. In other words, he used his bosses' money to buy good will with possible future employers.

Now, did this man do wrong? Of course, you say. He wasn't authorized to give away his company's money like that no matter how desperate he was. His behavior was inexcusable. Which brings us to this question: Why did Jesus make a hero out of the man in our parable? Basically—the man in this story is the same unjust steward in Jesus' story brought into modern times. Why would Jesus make a hero of this scoundrel?

The audience for this lesson today would have included persons of means (money), but early Christianity spread especially quickly among the humble. Many who first heard this parable via Luke might have been pleased to find the haughty rich either open to kindness or paid back for their greed,

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but the lesson they could take for themselves had to do with making their way—and making a way for Christianity—in a world in which they had a low status.

The steward in our parable, for fear of losing his job; having no other means to survive and having made no friends to rely on because of his shrewd business practices; stoops to what many would consider to be underhanded means to gain favor with not only his boss but also with those who owe his boss. And his boss, his master, who we would think to be God, commends him for his shrewdness. What's up with that God?

Jesus seems to be saying there is a place for money in our lives. It would be foolish to imagine that we could get by without money in a society such as ours. As we all know, there are some things only money can do.

Put a roof over your head, put food in your stomachs, fill your car up with gas. Try to do it without money. Impossible! There is a place for money in our lives. Jesus knew that. He was a practical man. He knew that there were some things only money can do.

Jesus is saying, however, that we are in deep trouble if money has first place in our lives. Money is a nice servant but a terrible master.

It has been suggested that the reduced bills to his customers may have represented the correct amount that they owed, that the steward may have been "padding" them for his own profit. This kind of dishonesty was very common then and continues so today. If this was the case here, the master still received what was owed him, but the debtors were now also in debt to

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show gratitude to the steward.

Many Christians have been offended by this parable. Some find it a bit disturbing that Jesus would find anything commendable in a person who has

acted dishonestly. Jesus isn't commending the dishonest manager for his dishonesty—He's commending him because he did something.

Jesus was a man of action, and He wanted His followers to be people of action as well. It saddened Jesus and still does that many of His followers are good people—but it's a negative kind of goodness that will never advance the kingdom.

There are some people who won't even act in their own behalf! Have you noticed that? Somebody or something outside themselves has to motivate them into action.

The manager in our parable was in a predicament and he took action, and Jesus praised him. And that's what Jesus wants us to do as well. Don't get discouraged. Don't sit around feeling sorry for yourself. Pray—yes—in all circumstances, but if there is something you can do for yourself—do it—and God will bless your effort.

There are many people who think the saying: "God helps those who help themselves" is scriptural. It isn't! That saying can probably be attributed to Ben Franklin. He quoted it in *Poor Richard's Almanac* in 1757.

The saying is partially true at best. Yes, God helps those who call on His name. But God won't do for us what we can do for ourselves. If God constantly worked to solve all our problems for us—we would remain

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forever emotionally and spiritually immature.

Have a problem? Here's the answer: Pray and work. God likes us to pray—but He also likes people of action. Pray and work—but don't attempt one without the other.

To boil it all down, Jesus is saying that worldly people are more farsighted and often more earnest in carrying on secular business than are the saints in doing the work of the Kingdom. This, of course, is not always true, but sometimes it is. Are we as eager, enthusiastic, and persistent in seeking to win people to Christ as successful salesmen are in closing deals? Why not? What if we were as good at what we do as McDonald's is at what they do, or Coca Cola or Microsoft? What if we were as committed to spreading the good news of the kingdom of God as American business is to winning new customers? This is the point Jesus is trying to make. He wants people who bear His name to not only be nice people but to be people who make a difference in the world.

Trustworthiness is measured by character. I think Jesus speaks for us all when He says that the person who can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with very much. Watch how someone handles the little things of life and you'll know how they will handle the big things of life.

We must all choose between God and money; and one of the greatest curses of popular Christianity is that of divided loyalty. But one thing is for certain, there is no doubt as to where Jesus' loyalty lies. As we learned last week: Jesus Christ loved sinners, He died for sinners, and He has promised

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a kingdom to sinners. Loved—died—promises are all words of action; Jesus was a man of action, and He desires action from us!

Thanks be to God!

