

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, September 18, 2016

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

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

Hark, the cry of my poor people
from far and wide in the land:

"Is the Lord not in Zion?
Is her King not in her?"

("Why have they provoked me
to anger with their images,
with their foreign idols?")

"The harvest is past,
the summer is ended,
and we are not saved."

For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no physician there?

Why then has the health of my poor people
not been restored?

O that my head were a spring of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
so that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my poor people!

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Luke 16:1-9

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him 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 said to himself, '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. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 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.

Let us pray...Amen.

Jesus was a brilliant story-teller, and his best known stories, parables, continue to provide wisdom and insight into our lives. Parables, however, aren't always clear to us, don't always make sense, and because they were told over 2000 years ago, in a culture that is very different from our own, we often miss important clues to the meaning behind the parable.

Today's parable describes a land owner who discovers that his property manager has been jacking up the bills of the townspeople, and skimming off the top of what he collects. Like most bosses who discover that their employees are being dishonest, he confronted the manager and demanded not only an explanation, he demanded an account audit so that he would know exactly what the manager had been doing.

The manager, afraid for his future (and rightfully so) began to slash the debts of those who owed his boss. In doing so, he hoped that he would be appreciated by those whose bill was reduced, perhaps enough that they would help him in his unemployment.

When the rich merchant saw what the manager had done to save himself, he commended him for being shrewd. And Jesus gives us the confusing line: "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 thought I was doing pretty good up until Jesus encouraged his disciples to make friends by using dishonest wealth...let's look a little deeper into this parable, and see if we can glean some meaning for ourselves in our modern lives.

One way to find meaning in the parables is to look for ourselves in the parable itself. Look at the characters, and see if we ourselves have ever been in a similar situation. In today's parable we have a rich merchant, a

dishonest manager, and a group of townspeople who have been mostly overcharged, but suddenly have their debts reduced.

Well, let's start with the rich merchant. Many of us do not have any experience in being rich, or in trading in goods and services. Most of us will have to acknowledge that we have little experience in hiring or firing individuals. So how do we get a handle on the experience of the rich master?

The rich merchant was likely overcharging on his loans right from the very beginning. But the manager upped the price so he could skim off some for himself, beyond his regular pay. He stole from his employer, he betrayed his employer, and he ruined his employer's reputation, whatever that may have been.

Maybe if we think about it like this: how many of us have ever had something stolen? How many of us have ever been betrayed? How many of us have ever had our reputation smeared by someone else?

We can all admit that we've been in positions similar to these, even if we aren't rich, and don't hire and fire people. We've probably had things stolen from us, we've been betrayed, and we've had our reputations smeared...so in a way, we do have something in common with the rich merchant.

Next, let's look at the experience of the dishonest manager: he is being dishonest with his employer's accounts, he knows it is wrong, but he's profiting from his cooked numbers. He's caught, and he is about to lose his job. His only recourse is to curry favor with those who owe his boss, so he forgives the amount of their debt that represents his cut, the amount he jacked up so that they will help him when he is in need.

Now I'm just guessing here, but very few of us can claim to have been caught for embezzling, or have been fired because we were dishonest with our employer's accounts. But what if we looked at it this way:

Have you ever forgiven someone for something they did, even if they didn't do it to you? Have you ever extended compassion to someone because it made you look good, or because you would eventually benefit from that compassion?

I know that sounds a bit complicated, but I think most of us would admit to benefiting from forgiving someone even when we weren't the ones they hurt. We've all expressed compassion, knowingly or not, that eventually benefits us.

Next, let's look at the townspeople: have you ever had a loan where the interest was probably higher than you could afford? Many of us can say yes to that. Have you ever been forgiven for something you did by someone other than the person you may have hurt? If we look deep enough, most of us can say that we have.

See, we can find ourselves in this complicated parable if we stop thinking about it in monetary terms, and begin thinking about it in forgiveness terms.

We *are* like the rich merchant when someone owes us an apology, or when we've had something stolen, or when our reputation is sullied. We *are* like the dishonest manager when we forgive someone who hasn't hurt us personally, but who we may have hurt. We *are* like the townspeople when we find ourselves having our debts forgiven, even if it's by someone we don't owe an apology to.

If we can find ourselves in this parable, and if we can forget about the economic aspects, and substitute forgiveness for oil, or grain, or shekels,

then the instruction that Jesus gives his disciples, “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” begins to make a bit more sense.

Forgiving another’s debt, when it’s not our debt to forgive, so that they will be open to helping us when we’re in trouble is easier to understand than the literal accounting of this story. And it helps us understand why Jesus would commend dishonest wealth to the disciples: it isn’t really about money, it’s about forgiveness of debt, it’s about extending compassion.

If we look at this parable as a sacred economy, you might come to the conclusion that rich merchant is God, the dishonest manager represents clergy, and the townspeople represent the children of God. Who else goes around forgiving people their debts and extending compassion to others as part of their job? But I would challenge each of us to claim our own role in this parable, to find ways to forgive others, to find ways to extend compassion toward those who have not hurt us personally, but who are still in need of their debt being forgiven.

Jesus was accused of eating with prostitutes and tax-collectors, and he extended forgiveness and compassion to them, even if they didn’t hurt him personally.

Who needs us to forgive their debt? Who needs our compassion, even if they haven’t hurt us personally? When we can answer these questions, we will understand our purpose as a church, we will understand our place in the world as the body of Christ.

The answer will be different for Fairmount than for Malden Road, but we still have to ask the questions: if our churches are the dishonest manager, if God is the rich merchant, who are the townspeople who need their debt

forgiven? I suppose it could still be tax collectors and prostitutes, but they too are a metaphor. When we offer food, comfort, forgiveness, compassion, and shelter to those who are in serious debt, we begin to make friends for ourselves by dishonest wealth.

Jesus modeled for his disciples, and for us, a radical way to live our faith. In this challenging parable, he suggests that we can extend forgiveness to others, not just those who owe us, but even to those who owe their debt to others. This is clearly a risky path to take, as Jesus continually got in trouble with the scribes and Pharisees for his approach to ministry.

Who in our lives needs radical forgiveness? Who in our town needs radical forgiveness? Who in the world needs radical forgiveness? When we can find the answer to these questions, we will find the focus we need to grow as a faith community, as the body of Christ.

Jesus had a list: our neighbor, the least of God's children, the poor and impoverished, sinners, widows and orphans, our enemies...ourselves.

Of course, it's easy to extend forgiveness and compassion to those we like, to those we love, to those we respect. But what does it mean for a community like ours to extend forgiveness and compassion to those in our society who are hated, despised, forgotten? This gets to the heart of what it means to be the church, and it has deep implications for the future of the Christian faith in the modern world. I don't have the answers, but I certainly have a lot of questions, and that's always a good place to start.

This week, if I could have you think about one thing, it would be this: who could benefit from your forgiveness and compassion? Name one person who needs forgiveness, even if they haven't harmed you. And then consider forgiving them, extending to them the compassion of your heart.

And if each of us were to do that, I promise you, the world will be a better place. Amen.