

“THE BALM IN GILEAD”

a sermon on Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1, Ps. 113, I Timothy 2:1-7, and Luke 16:1-14
September 18, 2016, by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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Last week, I reflected on that horrific day fifteen years ago we know as simply, “9/11,” including the “contrast” between the day’s *beauty* . . . as a clear and lovely early fall morning up and down virtually the entire Eastern half of our county, and the ugly reality of the attacks themselves. And that day came back to me again as I first read *today’s* lectionary texts, because they, too, are very contrasting words.

First, we have a reading that is a piece of Jeremiah’s prophecy in which he “laments” about Israel’s woes – including those yet to come. That is followed by a Psalm that is Hymn of Praise to God who “raises the poor from the dust.” It is followed by a reading from First Timothy that seems to be bidding us to pray for the continued success of worldly “kings and all who are in high places.” Finally, we have the parable from our Lord that is probably the single most difficult of all his sayings to even *understand*, let alone interpret and apply to life here and now – a parable that leaves us asking, “who is the “good guy,” here, and who is the villain? Who is doing “right,” and who is doing “wrong?”

I was reminded, in reading those texts, not just of 9/11 *itself*, but of what happened in the days that *followed* it. I’ll make a confession, of sorts. I was pretty depressed in those following days. As I noted last week, I was really just getting settled in as the Presbytery Executive here in St. Andrew – and still getting used to the fact that I was no longer the pastor of my own congregation.

I was doing a good bit of *preaching* in those day, as I always have. I really cannot *not* preach. Almost immediately after I started my new position, my sense of call to the “ministry of the Word” was clearly confirmed. It’s in me, and it just *has* to come out. But as it happened, I wasn’t scheduled to preach anywhere on the Sunday that followed 9/11, nor did I have church family to gather together, as many of my colleagues were doing, for a special prayer service or commemoration of some sort that week.

And now here’s the confession part. Very shortly thereafter I started having second thoughts about leaving the pastorate in the first place. I even wrote a new “Personal Information Form,” and circulated it a bit back in some congregational settings.

But since I didn't have a congregation of my own, per se, I did a lot of "observing" and analyzing of what I saw other Christian leaders doing. The first thing I noticed was that whereas *usually* the most "visible" clergy in the national spotlight – meaning, I suppose, on newscasts and talk shows, and the like, were those from the big non-denominational mega-churches, all of a sudden, they were nowhere to be found, and it was the old mainline protestant and catholic clergy who were immediately front and center. The only time I could remember ever seeing more clergy collars on news shows was when a new pope was being elected!

And I think I know why. Our traditions have been through a lot. We have seen very good times, and very bad. And our prayer books are filled with the full *range* of human emotions, in response to the full range of human *experiences*. I honestly think that a lot of folks from those "prosperity Gospel" kinds of new non-tradition churches were simply at a loss for words, but we weren't. We may not have had to *use* those words for a while. But they came pouring out – words of lament, words of grief, but also words of hope, and words of God's Sovereignty.

I think we were better able to stand up and admit that, in the words of that great Catholic theologian, Jimmy Buffet, "the God's honest truth is, it *ain't that simple!*"

As those of you in the Old Testament overview class will eventually be encountering, "laments" are one of a number of distinct "types" of psalms. I more affectionately refer to them as songs of "holy griping." And although there are lots of variations, laments follow a general *pattern* of five parts: an *invocation* which affirms God's existence or presence; the actual words of the *lament*, complaining to God about current circumstances (often about God's seeming *absence*); then *supplication*, in which the writer asks for God's help; *motivation*, which is what gives the writer reason to have faith that God will answer the supplication; and then finally a *vow* of some sort – the writer's promise of what they will do in response to their answered prayer.

And in that process, the psalms themselves often cover a huge range of emotions, sometimes in the span of just a few verses . . . whereas at other times, they go on for verse after verse of sometimes praise and adoration, but sometimes agony and pain, or repetitive complaints.

Jeremiah's words this morning – which certainly need to be read in the larger context of his whole prophecy – are just words of lament – not the full set of five parts, as in the psalms. In her commentary on this passage, in which she notes that her words were written just one day after the recent fatal shooting of five

police officers in Dallas, Duke Divinity School Professor Anathia Portier-Young writes:

If you are tempted to follow the lament with words and rites of assurance, of comfort, of hope, talk of resurrection and new covenant, new creation, reconciliation -- hold back. Don't give in to that urge. Not yet. On the day we let ourselves grieve together, we must not move too quickly for that quick fix. It won't fix it. It will not restore our sight and health, but submerge us once more in the dark disease of denial.

That's what I'm talking about. That deep sense that it is *ok* – even *good* – in the immediate aftermath of a time of personal or communal pain, to express disbelief, pain, anguish, or even *anger*. It's very *human* to both *experience* a wide range of emotions and also *express* them. It is what people of faith do.

Now, in a sense, all of that is simply a matter of setting the context for this morning's Gospel text, which as I have already stated is one of Jesus' most difficult to understand and interpret. In order to approach it with the ears of those who were its original hearers, you first have to remember that in Jesus' day the charging of interest was in and of itself a *sin*. And then too, those with considerable wealth were generally *assumed* to have attained it by means of exploiting those of lesser means.

And so a very plausible interpretation of the parable is that the "steward" who is not appreciated by his "lord" is really just attempting to be more caring and fair with the lord's subjects, and that his reduction in their "bills" was only their adjustment to more like what they really owed, instead of that they owed "with interest."

In the end, what Jesus seems to me to be saying about "wealth" (or "mammon" in older translations), is that either *it* can serve *you*, or *you* can serve *it*. And it is your responsibility, as Jesus' disciple, to ensure that the former is the case, rather than the latter.

If that is the case, then wealth, or mammon, is no – in and of itself – an either "good" thing, or a "bad" thing. It is simply a "tool" – and a *gift* – with which some of us have been entrusted, for the larger good. And the question is how we will use it.

I have to note a piece of Reformation history. Although the charging of interest was considered a sin in Biblical times, by the time of the Reformation, the world had changed. It was actually John Calvin, who we often call the "Father of Presbyterianism" who helped to develop the world's first banking system (which

included charging interest), but with the goal of allowing *all* people to increase their wealth by investing and receiving an increased rate of return. What the *biblical* writers were denouncing was a system that allowed only those “in power” to increase their wealth by charging interest. What the Reformers advocated was (and became) the rise of a “middle class” by allowing those *other than* the ruling class to invest, and increase their wealth.

So that, it seems to me, is a kind of resolution of the contrasts and seemingly conflicting perspectives in this morning’s lectionary readings. Whereas in Biblical times, the concept of charging interest as a means of uplifting those who have been held down was beyond comprehension, at the time of the Reformation – and indeed, up to and including our day – banking systems not only allow but *encourage* exactly opposite. They allow those of more *humble* means to make progress on moving *forward* in life, better providing for the their families, and creating a more hopeful future.

“Is there no balm in Gilead,” asks Jeremiah in his lament. Will God’s judgment be so severe that the people never heal?

The writer of the spiritual, writing from the midst of his own people’s pain and anguish gives the answer. “There *is* a balm in Gilead, that makes the wounded whole. . .” It is the knowledge that God turns even death itself into life . . . and as Luke’s Gospel proclaims from start to finish, that God lifts up the oppressed, and expects us to do the same.

There is a time to grieve and mourn. But there is also a time to use that experience as motivation to move forward and build the kingdom

My prayer this morning is that we will all commit ourselves to ensuring that *all* God’s children have the opportunities that we have had to enjoy life, benefit from its bounty, and be our Lord’s faithful disciples and servants spreading the word of God’s mercy and grace.

To God be the Glory.