

“THE LIFE THAT REALLY IS LIFE”

a sermon on Jer. 32:1-3a, 6-15; Ps. 146; I Timothy 6:6-9; and Luke 16:19-31
September 25, 2016 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
Sumner, Mississippi

My dad was an engineer, and a business man. A rather successful one, as a matter of fact. Although he was always an active church member, and generally a faithful choir member, we didn't talk a great deal about religion, or the Bible. What I *do* recall, however, was what he had to say on Sundays when the Scriptures included one of “those sayings” of Jesus – you know, like the one where the workers who showed up at the very end of the day got paid the same wage as the ones who worked all day . . . to which he said, “wonder how many will show up in the morning *tomorrow*, and how the work will get done!”

Of course, that isn't the point of the story. By my dad was a very *practical* man. And he had trouble processing Scriptures that challenged the way successful people know the world really works.

If you are anything like my dad, then today's lectionary readings are for you. After the appointed texts have, for some weeks now, seemed to focus more on God's *judgement* of those with wealth, and God's *care* and *concern* for the less fortunate, today's texts – while they are certainly *challenging* – begin to “connect the dots,” and make it exceedingly clear that it isn't the possession of wealth that is the problem, but rather the *tendency* of wealth to possess those who accumulate it.

So today's readings speak specifically to those who *have* wealth, and they contain words of wisdom about what to do with it.

With apologies, now, for having spoken about “9/11” for three consecutive weeks, after my sermon *on* 9/11, one of you reminded me that it was not long after the events of that fateful day that I preached *here* at Sumner Presbyterian Church. I hadn't recalled that, but I went back into my files, and sure enough, I preached from this pulpit on September 30th, 2001 – and because that was fifteen years ago, and the lectionary is a three year cycle, my sermon that morning was based on today's texts!

In that sermon, I specifically reflected on Jeremiah's decision, at a time of considerable upheaval in his land, when Jerusalem was under siege, to buy a field; that is, to *invest* in the land of Judah, as a sign of *trust* in God's promises and providence. And I noted that I had actually bought a new car that very week – not

as any particular “act of faith,” but because my transmission had died, and I really had no choice. But that said, I noted that the dealership hadn’t had a single sale in the weeks following 9/11, and so needless to say, they were *very* glad to see me walk in. There was so much “up in the air” in those days. It just wasn’t a time when you *wanted* to “bet the farm” on a particular outcome. No one knew where all this was headed.

And I get that. It makes perfect sense . . . from the perspective of a person of means.

Enter Jeremiah, the prophet. When we talk about the prophets, I think our tendency is to picture ascetics – people who were themselves almost outcasts, who lived on their own, out in the “wilderness,” like John the Baptist, living on locusts and honey.”

That that is not the case, at least when it comes to this prophet.

Jeremiah was from a well-known priestly family. He was a direct descendent of Abiathar – the high priest who was banished by King Solomon when he was consolidating his power and authority after his ascent to the throne. The intrigue and circumstances of that episode aside, my point is that Jeremiah was from an influential family – a family with history . . . and wealth.

And so by purchasing a field in Judah with some of that wealth – by *investing* in the very land that that was under siege by a foreign enemy – Jeremiah was not only willing but also *able* to demonstrate his faith in God’s providential care, and act on his conviction that the current era of God’s judgment would be followed by a time of God’s mercy, grace, and forgiveness.

Today’s reading from Luke is likewise a parable of Jesus directed to people of means who were among his followers. The story begins with what we might consider the “assumptions” of the people of that day – which is that something of our “status” in this earthly life follows us on into eternity – that a “master” here will be a “master” there, and a servant here, a servant there.

So even though he is in “torment,” the rich man’s *assumption* is that Lazarus can be tasked with bringing him some water for relief.

And the parable focuses our attention, in the end, not so much on either the rich man or Lazarus, but rather on the rich man’s *siblings*. “Send [Lazarus] to my father’s house,” the rich man “begs” . . . to “warn” them. And Abraham’s response is that they already have the warnings they need – in the words of the Scriptures. They just need to *heed* them.

Again, it is not a word of judgment against those who “have wealth.” It is a word of judgment against those who assume (or conclude) that our “status” in this life somehow exempts us from accountability for how we treat others – and in particular, those of lesser means.

True to Luke’s overall theme, the point is that in God’s eyes, *every* person is a precious child of God, and we are all equal.

What is perhaps distinctive about today’s readings is the focus on those precious children of God with whom God has entrusted wealth – which creates for them the *responsibility* to *use* that wealth *wisely*.

Our reading from First Timothy is another somewhat surprising text. Clearly, as the Christian message began to spread around the Roman Empire, it appealed to those who were on the fringes of Roman society – to the poor, the outcast, the downtrodden – and rightly so. But this reading in First Timothy makes it clear that those were not the *only* ones who were coming to faith in Jesus Christ in the opening decades of the Christian era. There were clearly people of “means” among the early Christians – and for that matter, in the Christian Community all along its journey up to and including the present.

And Timothy’s words are not words of judgment or chastisement. They’re words of *motivation*, really. “Fight the good fight.” “take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.” And I want to re-read the verses at the end of our reading for the morning:

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

I love that phrase – and titled this sermon by it. “The life that *really is* life.” That’s the point. Life lived with the false impression that our “station” here and now is somehow eternally decreed and secure is not *real*. And living only “to ourselves” isn’t really *living*.

The “life that really is life” is the life that appreciates what God has provided us “for our enjoyment,” but that is *also* not “haughty,” does not “set” its “hopes” on riches, and that recognizes the value of all persons.

Back, now, to my dad. He certainly wasn't a "perfect" person. None of us are. But to this day I appreciate what he taught me about respecting others. His saying was, "your rights end where the other guy's nose begins."

That's not so far from what Jesus had to say about the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man may have *thought* he had rights that followed him to the next life, but he didn't. And the reality is, we shouldn't live as though we have such rights even here and now, let alone in the life to come.

The Good News is that we *can* live that way – we can live the life "that really is life," whether *in this life* we are more people of means, or people in need. May God help us to so live, and to be faithful servants committed to building God's kingdom here on earth, in which all God's children are valued, and cared for.

To God be the Glory. Amen.