

Be Shrewd

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 Luke 16:1-13

***Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church
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This morning we heard words from the book of Jeremiah. This young prophet had work to do. He had words to say, wrongs to point out, messages from God to deliver. But there were times when all he could do was cry for his people.

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.”

*There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.*

In ancient days the balm of Gilead was a precious item of trade carried by caravans criss-crossing the near east. It was a healing ointment made from resin taken from trees in the mountains of Gilead, east of the Jordan River. But when Jeremiah looked for something to heal his people, there was nothing to be found.

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?

*There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.*

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!

*There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.*

Yes, Jeremiah, there is a balm in Gilead. As you would later proclaim, God comes to heal, to bring us home from exile, to write a new covenant on people’s hearts, to bring us the kingdom of God.

It is Kingdomtide and we have been talking about the kingdom of God, a central theme of the New Testament and the focus of the teaching of Jesus, who said, “Repent and believe the good news, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”

These are the things we have said about the kingdom of God so far:

The kingdom of God has broken into our midst through the ministry of Jesus, rearranging a broken world.

The kingdom of God is round, like King Arthur's table. There are no hierarchies at the kingdom feast. It is not a seat-of-honor reserved kind of place. It is rather a welcome-table kind of place.

Kingdom living means traveling on a difficult road – an open-and-vulnerable-heart road. It is difficult to open our hearts to the cares of the world, but once we are on that path, there is no other way we would choose.

Kingdom building means seeking the lost. The kingdom of God has open doors ... open doors not only so that the lost can come in, but open doors through which God goes out to gather wayward souls and bring them to the party.

Today Jesus tells us that kingdom seekers are shrewd. Kingdom seekers act with urgency and singleness of purpose.

And so we come to the 16th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. "I can't believe that came from the lips of Jesus." That was St. Augustine's comment on the story Jesus told about the dishonest steward.

For many years a man had been in charge of a rich man's estate. He was the overseer, and generally there was no one overseeing him. Perhaps he had done a little embezzling here and there as the opportunity arose. Perhaps he had just been careless with what didn't belong to him. Whatever it was, somebody noticed and told the boss. Imagine yourself in the steward's place. The game is over. The evidence is obvious. You have to give your boss a complete accounting of his goods, and there is no way you can juggle the books to hide the truth. You are going to lose your job, your reputation, and with it the ability to get another job.

"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 as his last act as overseer of his master's estate he calls in all of the debtors. "Do you owe a hundred? Give me 50 right now and we'll call it even. You owe a hundred too? How much do you have today? 80? We'll consider that payment in full. My master may have lost a little money, but every one of his former debtors now owes me a favor. I'm going to need a lot of favors, and I'm planning to collect every one of them!"

Then comes the surprise ending. The owner of the estate does not go into a rage when he finds out he has lost more profits. To the contrary! The rich estate owner "commends the dishonest manager for his shrewdness."

This is the end of the story. There are probably a lot of people standing around, wondering what Jesus is getting at. And Jesus does not disappoint. He tells us the point. But it goes by so fast that we easily miss it.

It is packed into the last half of verse 8. The first half of the verse was the surprise ending of the story: "And his master commended the dishonest steward because he had acted shrewdly." In the NRSV there is a semicolon there, but it marks an important shift. Before the semicolon Jesus is telling us what the characters in the story did. After the

semicolon, Jesus tells us the point: "for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light."

Hey, children of light, get your act together! Jesus tells us that we need to learn something about resourcefulness, dedication, and singleness of purpose from this unjust manager. We don't need to learn from him about ethics. We do not need to learn about his understanding of how the world works. But we can learn from him about singleness of purpose.

Can you get inside this character's head? Samuel Johnson once said that the hangman's noose has a remarkable way of centering one's mind. Here was a man with a focused mind. Jesus is not suggesting that we praise this man's morals, nor that of his rich master. But you've got to hand it to the guy, says Jesus, he knew how to use his wits in a jam. **My followers should be so resourceful!**

Look at the children of this world! See how talented they are at learning the ways of the world - see how focused they are on accumulating the things that the world calls valuable.

"When will my followers," Jesus asks, "dedicate themselves to the salvation of all, to the Kingdom of God, with the same fervor that the unjust go about their business?" So much of the world dedicates itself to things that will not last, how much more shall we dedicate ourselves to that which is eternal?

Our dedication to God's rule should be just as passionate, said Jesus. Love should be at least as effective a motivator as greed or self-preservation.

In his book "Love is a Spendthrift", Paul Scherer writes:

"You cannot leave to others the doing of what really needs to be done! If this vision you have of God does not move and drive and pull and tug and wrench and twist and hold and stride and walk off grimly after [God], it is nothing. We stultify it when we use it as a solace and no more. We prostitute it when we hitch it to some private little enterprise against headaches and nervous breakdowns.

This is to take the power of God that swings the stars in their orbits and ask it to do nothing but the household chores. It was designed to grip a world and to shape human history, and we have to give it passage."

Our dedication to God's way should be passionate. It should be global as well as local. It should be universal as well as personal.

When Jesus told the story of the unjust steward he was on the road to Jerusalem, and it was a time of crisis. In the time of crisis focus clearly and act effectively. The crisis, Jesus tells his followers, is not that some of you have had to leave your homes behind, or that we are not sure where we will sleep tonight. The crisis is that God is doing a new thing in the midst of the people, but they are not aware of it. It is time to focus on proclaiming good news. It is time to live out your response to God's love.

We live in a time of crisis. But what God sees as crisis is not the same as what we call a crisis. The crisis is not foreign enemies or the economy or the election. The crisis is not that it is too hard to balance the church budget.

The crisis is the same one Jesus faced 2000 years ago. People are unaware of God's love. God is in our midst, but we are not paying attention. The crisis is that each little part of the world is focused only on its own needs, while the whole of creation cries out in pain - "Is there no balm in Gilead?" The crisis is that though there are many who are skilled and dedicated when it comes to corporate mergers and positioning themselves

for maximum profits in the market economy; and there are political consultants who are excellent spin doctors and experts at damage control - but there are too few so dedicated and effective when it comes to sharing God's love.

God is transforming our world, and we are God's change agents.

So this is the plan:

- Proclaim the cross of Jesus, by which we know the preciousness of every life, for on the cross we see God's love for all.
- Let people know they are children of God, which makes all other things the world says about them secondary.
- Show the world a different way of being, calling into question social structures based upon scarcity, greed and fear and creating instead systems based upon abundance, love and trust.
- Send a work team to New Orleans, putting words and faith into action.
- Put our lives in order so that we can put our congregation in order, organizing ourselves to be focused and effective, connecting everything we do with our essential mission to joyfully share God's love.

This is our mission, should we choose to accept it. If we get caught in the midst of it, God will not disavow us, because this is not a secret mission. Should we fail, God will ask us to try again. This crisis is not a short-term thing. It calls for a long-term commitment. Each new day of our lives is a day to be focused, effective servants - children of light - sharers of God's love. May Jesus be able to commend his servants for their shrewdness on behalf of the kingdom of God.