

A BALMY PARABLE

Sermon, September 22, 2019

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

As you know, “balmy” is an adjective, and at the root of “balmy” we find the noun “balm,” a fragrant ointment used to promote healing or soothe the skin. Jeremiah asks, *“Is there no balm in Gilead?”* which we’ll come to in a moment, but for now know that Gilead was a region of ancient Israel world renowned for this healing ointment made from the resinous gum of a kind of balsam tree indigenous to the area; it was a well known export of Gilead referred to at least four times in Scripture ... Genesis, Ezekiel and twice in Jeremiah. (*“Balm of Gilead”* is also mentioned in Edgar Allan Poe’s poem *“The Raven”*; the narrator believes the *“balm in Gilead”* can heal his broken heart, as he is lamenting the death of his love, Lenor.) Again, the balm would be applied to effect healing and restoration to health. The adjective “balmy” took on the figurative meaning of anything that is “soothing” ... e.g., balmy weather is mild, soothing weather. Sometime in the 1850s, however, “balmy” also came to mean crazy or foolish. Most likely, “balmy” in this sense comes from the vague, tuned-out, “mild” manner of an afflicted person who may have had too much “balm.” People who are “balmy” in this sense tend to be quietly loopy, out of it, a bit touched, eccentric, crazy.

So, is Jesus parable here “balmy” in the sense of soothing, healing, comforting? Or is it “balmy” in the sense of ... loopy? This IS one of the strangest stories Jesus ever told; at first reading, it certainly seems He is uncharacteristically and rather cynically condoning “the ends justifies the means”, even if it involves some skullduggery! Now, as one who believes the Scripture to be our infallible rule of faith and practice, I also believe it will be consistent ... and if there seems to be an inconsistency, that means I/we may not have all the information on hand. But, I’m getting ahead of myself a bit.

In Jesus’ story, there was a rich man who had a manager for his estate, a steward ... a paid position, by the way, which was sometimes compensated by commission. This steward, this manager, was mismanaging his master’s affairs. The master finally decided he had had enough; he determined the manager needed to go. The master called this manager in, and told him to provide an accounting of his work, pretty much telling him he was finished. It’s important to note, though, the manager was apparently given a grace period to sort things out; he wasn’t fired on the spot. He was given a short window in which to provide for the master an accounting for how he had managed (or, mismanaged) the master’s estate.

The manager was beside himself. *“What shall I do now?”* he wondered to himself. *“My master is taking away my job. Now I’ll have to get a REAL job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg.”* So, he hatched a plan, taking advantage of this grace period he’s been given to try and put things in order. He called in each of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, *“How much do you owe my master?”* *“Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,”* the first debtor replied. The manager told him, *“Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.”* Then he asked the second, *“And how much do you owe?”* *“One thousand bushels of wheat,”* he replied. The manager said, *“Take your bill and make it eight hundred.”* So, he used this short window of opportunity to buy himself some good will with others so he would have somewhere to turn when he was out of a job. And Jesus ended this little tale: *“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”*

Now, we know this is Jesus’ parable, and we know sometimes Jesus thought outside the box, but did we hear this right? Use money to gain friends in order to get to heaven? The master *commending* the dishonest manager for his scheme? Is Jesus commending this *“ends justifies the means”* approach? For more than 2,000 years earnest scholars, industrious Bible study leaders and brave preachers have struggled to explain this parable. I’ll admit, I really haven’t fallen into that last category ... I’ve only preached on this just twice in thirty-five years; whenever it would come up in the lectionary cycle I would pick one of the other readings, or a topic of my own. Again, this is one of the strangest stories Jesus ever told! I mean, it sure sounds like He is pointing to this apparent scoundrel who seems to be cheating his boss and He says, *“Here’s somebody you need to emulate!”* What are we missing?

Over the years I have come across just one interesting and very plausible explanation (*to me, anyway*) that really does make for something of a “soothing” application of this parable, but it’s not readily observable without knowing some of the historical context. Note the contract for eight hundred gallons of olive oil is cut in half; the bill for a thousand bushels of wheat is reduced by two hundred. Some scholars tell us these aren’t random reductions. Each of these reductions had roughly the same *monetary* value in that day: together they were worth about five hundred denarii. In other words, two hundred bushels of wheat was worth 250 denarii on the market and four hundred gallons of olive oil was also worth 250 denarii on the market. It’s quite possible five hundred denarii would

have been the manager's commission, his salary, his pay had he stayed on the job for the duration of the loan contracts involved. If this is the case, then he just lopped off his commission, five hundred denarii's worth, that would have been his salary. He sacrifices his potential paycheck. In the eyes of the debtors the manager looks good, and the master looks good ... everybody thinks they are both wonderful ... and the master really doesn't lose anything. Everyone is happy! What a story!

I really don't know if that's the right explanation, but it makes more sense to me than anything else I've read in commentaries on this parable ... and believe me, I've read a lot! In this interpretation, the bottom line is that this man knew he was about to face an accounting, and he prepared for it in the time he had by banking on the mercy and generosity of the master and acting the best he knew how AND by sacrificing all his potential income. He knew he deserved to lose his job, he took advantage of the time he had, he took action the best he legally knew how ... and Jesus praised him for it! Whether or not this is the correct explanation, it is consistent with the nature of Jesus because **Jesus liked people who took action**. The manager knew judgment was coming, and he acted the best he knew how, which included availing himself of what he knew about his master's generosity. The master apparently had a reputation for generosity, because the debtors readily believed the manager changed the terms of the bills in their favor with the master's approval. They probably said to themselves, *"Well, how about that. Isn't that like Mr. Master! He's a generous man, all right!"*

Now, due to time constraints there's so much I haven't touched on in this parable other than to underscore Jesus **liked** people of action, but it IS an important point. Lord knows we have enough hand-wringers in the world! You know who I'm talking about: people of *in-action* who look at problems around them or at impending disasters and say, *"Dear me, isn't it awful, somebody ought to do something."* Well, yes; somebody *should* do something. WE should do something! An accounting is coming for all of us, and we should do what we can in the time we have and with the means we have to try and set things right ... if nothing else, we should make certain we are doing what is right as much as it is in our power to do so.

Now, to attempt to try and tie our two rather disparate lectionary readings together in one "package": In a nutshell, I think this is what the prophet Jeremiah was trying to get the people to do.

Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet. His career spanned more than four decades. Four decades he could see how his people were abandoning God and godly living, and with a prophet's eye he could clearly see the day of reckoning coming (*in the form of the invading Babylonians*) and throughout it all, though, Jeremiah did what he could to get people to prepare for the "accounting." He spoke up and spoke out, hoping that some would hear, that some would take action and do something to change their ways before it was too late. He was one of the most colorful of the Old Testament prophets, often using vivid and unique visual aids to reinforce his messages; for example, Jeremiah tells the people *"You have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame."* (Jeremiah 3:3). In short, it means they have been doing wrong for so long they have even lost the capacity to blush; nothing seems to embarrass or shame them anymore! As we looked at last week in Jeremiah 4, God says: *"My people are fools; they do not know Me. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good."* These people got so skilled at doing evil that they no longer knew what was good; they didn't even have any sense of shame for the evil they've done! The people would not listen to Jeremiah, many of his own townspeople, even some of his family, opposed him and tried to shut him up. Jeremiah asks, rather rhetorically, *"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?"*

Of course there is a balm in Gilead ... as mentioned, Gilead was world renowned in that day as an exporter of balm! To be healed and soothed by the balm, however, one has to apply it, one has to use it! The prophetic imagery here is of people who are morally and spiritually diseased and in need of healing, but they will not apply the means of grace and healing. The balm in Gilead, by the way, is also a prophetic image of what is to come ... as healing balm was exported from this region of Israel, so One who will come out of Israel to bring healing to the nations. In this historical context, though, the people are being warned by Jeremiah to repent and turn to the divine Physician to heal their sin sick soul while they still had time. But they refused, and judgment came ... in the form of the invading Babylonians.

Is there no balm in Gilead? Of course there is. That's like asking *"Are there no doctors in Boston?"* But people who are sick need to avail themselves of that balm. In Jesus Christ, the Divine Physician is ever present as a healing presence ... awaiting that moment when we recognize just how wrong things are, repent, come to Him and decide to take action to set things right the best we know how in whatever time we have remaining. Let us come to Him in the time we have, and find soothing healing for our sin-sick souls, receive the healing balm of God's grace in Jesus Christ, and take action the best we know how, based on what we know of our Master's gracious generosity.