

Pentecost 15, Lectionary 25  
Sunday, September 18, 2022  
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1  
Luke 16:1-13

1 It's one of Jesus' stranger suggestions: "Make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth." And then this hard truth: "You can't serve God and wealth."

I've done this before, but it's worth doing again. I got this idea from a writer named Brian McLaren, from a sermon he preached at a conference I attended a few years ago.

Here are his words, more or less: "I'd like you to reach into your pocket or your purse for a minute and pull out a credit card, or a coin or a bill. Take a look at those representatives of our economic system, at those things that are our tickets to participating in this world. Think about how much you owe these objects and how much they own you, and now think about the hold and the claim these things have on you versus the hold and the claim that God has on you. Just think about that for a minute.

Next, just for fun: Keep your eyes open and hold these up like this and think about how little you see when you're looking at money.....

Now keep them there....

A famous Latin American theologian name Leonardo Boff once said that in these days more than any others we must hear the cry of the earth, and the cry of the poor. And now imagine how we can be so blinded by the noise of commercials and hucksters and politicians who so often seem bought and paid for by money...

...and now just pull the money away from your eyes....and now say quietly to yourself, "I want my eyes to see my neighbour and my ears to be open to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor."

Just for a minute, listen. Hear the voice of rivers that dried up last year and flooded this year, and the land that cracked open last year and that dried up too late this year.

Don't look at the money, but listen to the air that's clogged with ash over the mountains and smog over our cities....

Listen to species that struggle to survive in water or on land or on arctic sea ice....

Or listen for the cries of those who are poor...in downtown Winnipeg...in Fort Richmond...on the median at the corner of Pembina and Bison. Listen for those whose business has thrived but it now seems like they're losing it all... or whose debt is too large or whose income is too small...

Think of anyone who worries about their home or grieves for their country or wonders what will happen next. In a place like Yemen or Ukraine...in a place like the U.K. or the U.S or Canada.

3 And now listen again to what we heard as Jeremiah was read today. It's 2700 or so years ago, and Jeremiah has watched his own country and his own land sink into a ruin that it brought upon itself. Foreign armies have left behind rubble and dust; the land is empty and so many of the people have been taken away or have fled for safety to strange new places.

Now imagine Jeremiah and the people and their God all sitting in a circle, giving voice to everything going on. Jeremiah speaks first: “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Listen, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land.” Or was it God who said that?

The people of the land say, “Is our monarch, our sovereign, not here, is God not with us any more?”

And then it’s God’s turn to speak, and God is not in a happy place that day: “Why have these people provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?”

But the people have to say their piece again:

“The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” Where have you been, God?

And finally, Jeremiah pours out his heart: “For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me....

“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!”

Such a haunting voice. Jeremiah warned his people to stop selling their lives to idols and wealth; to stop crushing the weak and the poor, and to turn again to ways of compassion and justice and peace. But they don’t change, and now Jeremiah sees it all falling apart, just like he said it would, and he sees it and his heart breaks.

So Jeremiah just grieves. He speaks like any of those voices who cry for their nation, or their people, or for everyone they love, or for their home, or for the land.

It's good to listen for grief and lament in the Bible. And just let it be there. It's all over the place. Sometimes it's right out there for us to see, like when a woman named Hagar watches and waits for her son Ishmael to die. Sometimes you need to listen closely to hear the lament in the background and between the lines where it's not written, like when Adam and Eve weep for their son Abel who was killed by their other son Cain, or while Egyptian parents mourn for their sons who have been killed by an angel who passed over their homes, or drowned in the sea as the waters came together and passed over. Paul sits lonely in prison wondering when he'll be free, the Psalms are filled with tears and anger and fear and grief. Even Jesus wonders aloud why he has been abandoned by God, and then everything goes silent for awhile. Scripture is full of broken hearts and grief like Jeremiah's and it's OK to hear that because it's all a part of our story, and sometimes we just have to let it be there. It's God's story too.

4 Step back now to that strange story from Luke. It starts with the simple words, "There was a rich man who had a manager," and right away you might notice that Jesus is talking about money again. He does that a lot.

And the most important thing in the story, the punch line, really, is that very last thing Jesus says: "You can't serve God and money."

Jesus really means that, and we can't just ignore that, because we live so much of our lives in service to money.

But I don't think that he's trying to browbeat or nag or give us a lecture. Instead, he's doing something like this: He's reminding us that we are not

servants of money, but are servants of God, who gives us all we need, and who calls us to be servants of one another. He's reminding us that we are not *slaves* to money, or to our financial success or failure or mediocrity; and money finally has no claim over who we are. We belong to God, who simply calls us beloved.

What Jesus is doing is pulling away those credit cards and cash from our eyes so that we can see again, and we can hear again. See our neighbour again. See one another. Hear our neighbour again. Hear one another. Be seen. Be heard.

I was trying to think up a catchy story, something about lamenting and hoping, with a good touch of "can't serve God and wealth" thrown in to wrap this all up and send us on our way. Something in the news, a good story that came up in the last week or two. But none of it sounded right. The thing is, we're living in our own kind of lament right now. For some of us it's very personal as we grieve the loss of someone we've loved, or the loss of a job or a relationship.

We're in a time of lamenting for the earth, and we wonder whether we've already passed some kind of climate crisis tipping point. What have we lost? What are we on the verge of losing?

And honestly, as a church we are in a time of lament. We've lost something over these past two years, and we don't know how or if we will get it back. Well, we've been changing, kind of losing what we once had, for a long time now, and I mean we as a congregation and we as a Church – you know, the larger church. I wouldn't say that we're wandering around in the ruins, like the people of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's time. But we are wondering about where we're going, where this will end or start again.

It's OK, you know. If you're lamenting or we're lamenting, we join that circle with Jeremiah and God and the people of Jerusalem and we share with them in those words of grief, or anger, or confusion. If you're the one lamenting you don't need to apologize for it or try to fix it. God's OK with hearing it and holding it. If you or I are the ones listening to the lament, we don't need to try to fix it.

Because in that circle and in this life we are heard by the God who breathed life into all that is and who has promised - even when it's hard to do - who has promised that lament will end and life will pick up again. And in that circle and that life we are joined by Jesus, whose cry of lament joins ours, who shares our living and our dying with us, and who is risen from the dead so that we too will live again - in this life and in the life to come.

AMEN.