

September 18, 2022
"Be the Balm"
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 / Luke 16:1-13
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" That, again, from the prophet Jeremiah.

You may or may not know that Gilead was the central region in ancient Palestine, east of the Jordan River and eventually bordering the northern end of the Dead Sea in the south – in what is present day Jordan. It's a place recognized in the Bible as the birthplace of the prophet Elijah, among other notables.

It was a mountainous and fertile place known for its spices. And, of course, known for the balm or ointment produced there. Believed to have been produced from the resin of balsam trees, and used – still today – for a broad range of healing purposes: to treat eczema, sunburn, frostbite, dry skin, sprains, bruises, rashes; to reduce pain and inflammation, protect the immune system, speed healing, soothe the stomach and detox the body.

We are likely more familiar with the phrase, "balm in Gilead," from the African American spiritual, "There Is a Balm in Gilead" – calling on Jesus as the balm that makes the wounded whole and heal the sin-sick soul.

Some of you may even recognize it from Edgar Allen Poe's poem, "The Raven":

*"On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—
Is there—is there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!
Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."*

The balm of Gilead is both a source and a metaphor for healing. We hear it this morning from the prophet Jeremiah, lamenting over the fate of his people – facing desolation and destruction and eventual captivity at the hands of the Babylonians, the result of the people's turn from God and the covenant, the Mosaic law that demands justice, love of neighbor, care for God's people – especially those most vulnerable. Care for creation, as we heard last week – with the earth itself mourning its own destruction.

"My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. ... 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? When then has the health of my poor people not been restored?"

It's not altogether clear if Jeremiah is talking, or God, but regardless, Jeremiah embodies divine suffering at the self-destructive plight of God's people. Where is the balm to heal my people's wounds?

Maybe Jeremiah is pleading with God to bring the healing balm? Or maybe God is pleading with God's people to be the balm for each other? Is there TRULY no balm in Gilead?

Is there no balm in Ukraine, as war and terror and torture rage on at the heartless whims of an authoritarian dictator?

Is there no balm in Pakistan, where historic flooding now gives way to widespread hunger and disease?

Is there no balm in Texas and Florida, where Black and brown immigrant families are dehumanized, treated as nothing more than pawns by white politicians?

Is there no balm in cities like Detroit and Philadelphia, where ghetto poverty and homelessness and gun violence and police violence and underfunded schools reflect a legacy of racist policy and practice?

Is there no balm in this country, with the populist and political rise of white Christian nationalism, the legislative and judicial assault on voting rights, abortion rights, civil rights simultaneous to the legislative and judicial elevation of rights to own and carry guns and weapons of mass violence.

Is there no balm in the church, where the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer children of God continue to be dismissed as sinful rather than embraced as sacred?

Is there no balm for workers across the globe, whose labor continues to be exploited and whose livelihoods continue to be stolen in the name of unchecked capitalist greed? To the benefit of a wealthy few?

Is there no balm for sexist glass ceilings and misogynistic work places, for toxic masculinity and endless cycles of abuse, for private prisons and mass incarceration, for human trafficking and corporate land grabbing?

Is there no balm for the planet, which revolts in the face of profit-driven fossil-fuel addiction and climate change, with record heat waves and hurricanes, melting icebergs and massive flooding, catastrophic drought and wildfires?

Is there no balm in Israel and Palestine? In Syria? In Afghanistan? China? North Korea? Haiti? Jamaica? Liberia? Ethiopia? Mexico? Guatemala? In Indigenous territories of North America and around the world?

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Maybe Jeremiah is pleading with God to bring the healing balm? Or maybe God is pleading with God's people, maybe God is pleading with all of us, to be the balm for each other and for the earth? To be the change we want to see, the change the world so desperately needs.

Prophetic witness isn't meant to plead for a savior, it's meant to inspire a social revolution. A revolution of hearts and a reorientation of systems and structures that always asks, above power and profit, above all else: What does love demand and what does justice require? What does mercy and compassion look like?

There are no more important questions to ask. These are prophetic, gospel questions.

On that note, the gospel reading this morning gives us easily one of the most, if not the most, confusing and confounding of Jesus' parables.

The so-called "Parable of the Dishonest Manager" is a parable specifically directed, we're told, to Jesus' disciples. It's unique to Luke's gospel. Biblical scholars and

theologians have debated its meaning for centuries. Look up the exegesis of 10 scholars and theologians and you will find 10 distinctly different interpretations. And a lot of head scratching.

Sometimes we just don't understand what God is trying to tell us, what Jesus is trying to tell us, but we keep trying. At the very least, it's helpful to understand the context.

The parable, following the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and prodigal son, is also placed within the broader arc of Luke's thematic emphasis on generosity, on concern for the poor, much more than the other gospels. On poverty and wealth. On notions like the convenient summary we get following this parable, which most scholars suggest was added later: "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Or mammon, in the original Greek – wealth that's regarded as having an evil influence, or wealth as a false object of worship.

"For where you treasure is, there will your heart be also." That, too, from Luke. And from Matthew.

As Barbara Rossing writes, "Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' ministry invokes the biblical concept of Jubilee and debt forgiveness. Economic restitution is part of the joy of Mary's Magnificat and the joy of the gospel proclaimed to tax collectors such as Zacchaeus." Both found in Luke.

In first-century, Roman-occupied Palestine, the rich were the landowners. And they were loan sharks. At least some of the land, if not all, acquired when the original owners lost their properties as a result of debt they couldn't pay off.

And the former landowners then turned to tenant farmers, stuck in an endless cycle of debt – forced to buy their staple items, items they may have previously grown or raised for themselves, from the wealthy landowners at highly inflated prices. Even though

Jewish law forbade charging interest. Wealthy landowners came up with creative work-arounds, disguising interest as part of the original principal.

This, of course, is a familiar dynamic throughout human history. A history of oppressive and “illegitimate” debt that continues – everything from high-interest student loans to predatory pay-day loans to national austerity measures imposed on countries unable to pay back multilateral and bilateral loans from foreign banks, countries or other investors like the World Bank or International Monetary Fund. At the expense of poor, landless citizens who have nothing to do with the debt in the first place.

The manager, or steward, was a cog in this exploitative economic machine. As guilty as the landowner is of exploiting the tenants to his own benefit, with his own cut of the inflated interest on top of the landowner’s portion. On top of any taxes paid to Rome.

The landowner gets word, presumably from the tenants, that the manager is “squandering his property.” He goes to the manager and demands that he provide an accounting – and fires him.

The manager is stuck. Given the accusations against him, he won’t be able to find another managing job somewhere else. He won’t or can’t, or at least can’t imagine, becoming a tenant himself – used to a certain kind of lifestyle perhaps, or too ashamed or too scared to take his place among the very people he’s been exploiting.

He comes up with a solution, while continuing to look out for himself, He goes to each of the landowner’s tenants – again, presumably the very same tenants who turned him in in the first place – and forgives their debts. We don’t know the details in inviting them to literally rewrite their debt documents. He may be forgiving just his own cut of the interest, or he may be going as far as Mosaic Law demands – forgiving ALL the hidden interest beyond the original principal, so that the tenants are left to pay back ONLY what they borrowed in the first place.

Remember that this is Jesus telling the parable. It feels safe to say that Jesus would not have celebrated anything short of full debt forgiveness.

We're told the manager is motivated by wanting to get on the tenants' good side now that he's likely gonna become one of them – so that people may welcome him into their homes as one who is about to be homeless. Regardless of his motivation, at some significant level as far as Jesus is concerned, he rights the wrongs for which he is responsible.

When he goes back to the landowner, his master, he is commended, **COMMENDED**, for what he's done, for acting shrewdly, prudently, wisely. Wait, what? Why?

Again, because the text leaves out a bunch of details, you could argue that the manager only forgave his cut – and so the landowner simply accepts his correction, and is content to still be getting his own cut. But this is Jesus talking!

If, then, the manager forgave the tenants' FULL debt, why in God's name would the landowner be pleased? Why is the landowner not pissed that his soon-to-be-former manager, accused of dishonestly “squandering his property,” has now dishonestly squandered his profit margin?

Some interpretations like to cast God in the role of the landowner, suggesting that God is pleased that the manager has forgiven all the debts. But that, of course, makes God the greedy, unscrupulous, exploitative villain!

Let's agree that God is not the wealthy landowner!

We don't know if the landowner is Jewish or not; if he was, he would've been familiar with the Torah and its strong prohibitions against charging interest. And so perhaps, the commendation was simply an opportunity to at least appear to be observing covenantal laws? Or regardless, perhaps it's just about being able to associate himself with the honorable action of his manager, to align himself with some sense of perceived public honor following the embarrassing dishonor of whatever it is his manager was initially accused of doing? We don't know.

But we do know that Jesus doesn't mean for us to take a shine to the landowner. In fact, it's pretty clear that Jesus is calling out the landowner.

The manager is no righteous hero either, but he does the right thing here. He cancels the debt that ultimately perpetuates poverty – and in so doing, he puts the landowner on the spot. Jesus is calling out the landowner and this widespread exploitative practice, a practice that would've been well known to his followers. Jesus' parables are not limited to spiritual lessons; they are profoundly practical critiques of the social and economic and religious status quo.

Curiously, Jesus goes on to say, in a verse that some scholars also think was added later: "... make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you in the eternal homes."

At first glance it seems like Jesus is encouraging engagement with "dishonest wealth," mammon. If you're gonna deal with dishonest wealth, at least make the best of it. Make friends, not enemies. Do good, not harm.

Some interpretations suggest Jesus is being ironic. Maybe?

Jesus clearly doesn't want his disciples, any of us, to get caught up in the allure of wealth. Again, within the broad arc of Luke's gospel, within the broad arc of Jesus' life and ministry, the message is clear: you cannot serve both God and money.

Maybe for Jesus, all wealth is ultimately dishonest because – at some level – it cannot help but compromise our capacity to love, to fully love each other. The more I accumulate for myself and my people, the less there is to share with others. That's common sense.

We are left to discern, individually and collectively as would-be followers of Jesus, of Jesus' way of divine love, the lines between what is too little and what is enough, and between what is enough and what is too much.

In the inequitable way that our society is and has long been structured, a wealthy minority has more than the poor majority, but we all need money to survive. To thrive. Jesus would say, and did, that we need each other – certainly including the planet – to survive. To thrive.

Capitalism as we know it, puts private profit before the public good of people and the planet, at any cost. Many, including me, would argue that Jesus was a socialist to his core. A political revolutionary who lived and died for an equitable sharing of life, of wealth, of abundance. For Jesus, any economic structure that leaves people poor, and the planet devastated, is not gospel economics. Any accounting that allows for poverty and climate change is not divine accounting.

I am no economist, but I am inspired by the movement for co-operatives and benefit corporations, so-called B corporations that share ownership and wealth, that are accountable to ALL stakeholders, including the planet, and not just shareholders. They show us both that capitalism as we know it is the source of most, if not all, of the world's problems, AND that even capitalism can be practiced in a way that honors gospel economics. That lifts up the spirit of Mosaic law prioritizing justice and protection of the most vulnerable among us. That does NOT put profits before people and the planet.

I like to think that the dishonest manager, whatever his motivation, is doing what he can to declare biblical Jubilee! Using whatever agency and power he still has left in the moment to blow up, to reimagine, the inherently dishonest economic structure. To at least point it in the direction of justice. To at least try to be the balm, to make the wounded whole.

We don't know what happens after that, but whatever point Jesus was trying to make, he's made it.

The summary verses, 9-13 – again, possibly added later, attempt to clean up any confusion with the parable. There are more important things than money and wealth. Eternal riches. Life-giving riches.

If we have not been faithful with dishonest wealth, how can we be trusted with true wealth? If we have not been faithful with what does not belong to us, how can we be trusted with what does? We cannot serve both God and wealth.

Whatever the lessons to be learned, Barbara Rossing, again, writes: "Preaching on the vivid parable in Luke 16 means following Jesus into questions of how we practice

neighbor love in economic relationships, in the midst of unjust structures. What is important is to situate the parable in the broader economic context of how Jesus was reviving village life by reviving biblical covenantal economic life, forgiving debts and giving people new hope. In Luke, the joy of the Gospel is the joy of God's healing of relationships, including economic relationships."

There is a balm in Gilead. In Pennsylvania. In Philadelphia. And you are that balm. We are that balm. Called, by prophetic witness and within the ongoing divine covenant, to be that balm wherever we encounter brokenness in need of healing, in need of justice. To make the wounded whole.

In that spirit, I want to close by simply reading the lyrics to a song we will not be singing. A song by Shirley Erena Murray called, "Forgive Us, God, For All the Things We Waste! (aka Hymn for a Dollar-Rich Society):

*Forgive us, God, extravagant misuse
of goods and gifts our favored lives include,
of all we keep, of all we do not need,
the throwaways that of fashions and of food,
the scraps of all we do not think to share.
Good God, convert our currency to care!*

*Forgive us, God for all the things we waste:
for time unheeded, talents gone to rust,
for roads not taken when they seemed too rough,
for good intentions left to gather dust:
for thoughtless wasting of your gifts,
forgive the spendthrift way your children learn to live!*

*Forgive us God! We squander precious store:
the water borne from life streams of the earth,
the oil we burn without a second thought,
the forests felled for profit's passing worth,
for mindlessness, for human greed,
forgive the way your children operate to live!*

*O God, support us when with true intent
we turn to see our lives with others' eyes,
another's way to salvage and survive,
another's chance to use what we despise,*

*and shake our shallow, plastic ways of thought
to see the starving world our waste has bought!*

Good God, convert our currency to care! Our bombs to balm.

May it be so.