

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, Psalm 79:1-9, Luke 16:1-13
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If last Sunday's parables about a lost sheep and a lost coin were two of the easiest to understand, today we have perhaps the hardest to understand. This has been proven by the lively discussions we've had in all three Bible study groups last week.

Without trying to explain what Jesus may or may not have meant in today's parable, they let me make some general observations and offer some possible lessons to be learned.

Jesus doesn't want us to squander our resources or gain advantages by being dishonest. It's been said that money is to be used but not loved. People are to be loved and not used.

If we are the children of light, can we be as shrewd or prudent about the things of God as the faithless are about worldly riches?

The godless realm might commend "getting them before they get you." Jesus says, "Love your enemies, and bless those who curse you."

The godless realm might commend those who can accumulate the most toys. Jesus says, "Lay up treasures for yourself in heaven, where moth and rust can't consume and thieves cannot break in and steal."

Having to live in this world, we are pulled in both directions: The secular culture is all about accumulating and increasing net worth while Jesus is all about letting go and dispensing. Nearly everyone needs money to provide for food and shelter and basic necessities. The question becomes how much is enough? In this parable Jesus seems to suggest the problem isn't the wealth itself but one's use of it.

I read recently about a man who became a stock broker so he could make lots and lots of money. He also said that his motivation for wanting to make millions was so he could give millions of dollars away.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism said, "Make all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can."

Some of you will remember Peter Marshall. He was a Presbyterian clergyman who was twice appointed Chaplain of the U.S. Senate. He died in 1949. He was highly regarded as a deeply spiritual man and great preacher. He told the story of a man who came to him once with a peculiar problem.

The man had been tithing for some time, giving 10 percent of his income to his church. He told Marshall that it wasn't too hard to give \$2,000 away when he was earning \$20,000. The problem was that his income had increased to \$500,000, and there was just no way he could afford to give \$50,000 a year.

Marshall acknowledged that the man had a serious problem and asked if they could pray about it. The man agreed, so Marshall prayed, "Lord, reduce his salary back to the place where he can afford to tithe."

Perhaps the best summary of today's gospel reading goes something like this: Use worldly goods for God's purposes so when they fail or run out, you've made friends enough and gained character enough to receive a lasting reception.

So as not to be accused of talking too much about money, I'd like to now turn to Jeremiah and Psalm 79.

When we think of the prophets, we mostly associate them with bad news. God's people have misbehaved and turned to other gods, and they'd better change their ways or else. The prophets are rarely popular, even in our own day. This morning, however, Jeremiah is exhibiting unprophet-like behavior. Rather than being thunderous with God's message of unfavorable and severe judgment toward the people, Jeremiah is laid low – without joy, heartsick and full of grief.

He warned the people of the trouble to come, but when it did, he is overwhelmed with despair and compassion for God's people. He is fully aware that he is one of them as well. "Oh, 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."

It's very possible that Jeremiah is witnessing and responding to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian invaders as graphically described in Psalm 79. "O God, the heathen have come into your inheritance; they have profaned your holy temple; they have made Jerusalem a heap of rubble." The Psalmist continues describing the horrific massacre: Bodies are food for vultures and wild beasts and blood is flowing like water throughout Jerusalem.

Jeremiah, upon witnessing this carnage, is overwrought. Is this the result of God's anger upon Israel? The problem of God's violence, especially in the Old Testament, is troubling to us – both violence against God's people and violence by God's people.

This God doesn't mesh with the one revealed in the person of Jesus. He tells us that the God he knows makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and this God sends rain upon the just and the unjust. Having said that, it seems God does allow humankind to suffer the unfortunate consequences of our actions. Perhaps throughout the pages of the Old Testament destructive consequences were mistakenly attributed to the will of God.

I would like to think that the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 8 of today's reading is displaying not only his own deep grief, but God's deep grief and sorrow as well. Is it possible that God lets us suffer and seeks to console and comfort us? God lets us fail and fall only that we may rise to new and greater heights?

Mystic Julian of Norwich concluded, "First there is the fall, and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God."

We will never get it all together, wrapped up with a perfect bow. We know that to be true in our own lives, our families, communities, nation and world. After all, we're human. However, as long as we have the mercy of God, all can never be completely lost.

Thank God, then, that yesterday is over, a new day is dawning. Today we get to try again to do better and flourish with God's help. Amen.