

September 19, 2010 Balm in Gilead

Lections: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Ps. 79:1-9; I Tim/ 2:1-7; Luke 16: 1-13

Let's start with the instructions to Timothy – pray often. Pray for everyone. Prayer is good; it pleases God. Just do it. Prayer is not the center of things but it gets us to the center...to the heart of God, to Compassion.

So whether it is a friend emailing early in the day without details but with a need, just do it. Pray. Whether it means speaking to a Muslim woman about the recent rhetoric about the Koran burning or responding to a swimming pool challenge about a Muslim cultural center in New York City, (conversations I had this week), just do it. Pray often, for everyone. Offer some balm of Gilead to those who might be hurting.

We finally see some sympathy and a tender heart in Jeremiah; we have listened for weeks to him denouncing those in Judah. Today he offers compassion. The psalmist is clearly in lament for an overwhelming destruction. He asks for God's compassion and healing. The Bible often makes it clear that suffering is not something we can ignore or marginalize or explain away; it is something that should be shared within community. Then we can ask for prayerful action.

The story is told of the famous Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich who wrote a letter to the editor of a state run newspaper to support artistic freedom and human rights. The Soviet Union responded by stripping him and his wife of their citizenship. Years later he gave one of many beautiful concerts, this time in Chicago where John Buchanon, writer for the Christian Century, observed a remarkable thing. While the audience was still resting in the final notes the master cellist kissed his cello then hugged and kissed the conductor and then the cello section and then the violinists and then most of the orchestra. The audience went wild to see such tenderness from someone who had known suffering. One might call it a balm in Gilead. "Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my life's in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again."

Generosity is carried out by faith communities in many ways; it flows from the center of things. I watch in wonder and awe as prayer shawls come and go from this place. Just one example of the time and talent of parishioners, Pamela Cooper and Pat Brush and now Vicky Ash, they are made with prayer for those who need the comfort of our prayerful action. We're going to bless them this morning and give them away. And we're offering healing oil as well. Take what you need for yourself or for others. And pray often, for everyone. Perhaps you have a friend or a co-worker who needs a reminder of compassion. None of us knows every need here; our shawls have been given for those grieving or undergoing cancer treatments but there are many ways to be hurting. Share the faith of this place and move these shawls to those in need.

At Day1.com preacher Ted Brackett takes a look at today's gospel and calls Jesus a Rogue Rabbi who won't stay in a neatly defined box of mediating God's justice or meting out God's forgiveness only if it was truly warranted and the law had been satisfied. He generously gave what he had freely to all.

We have a hard time getting to the specific circumstances of this story in Luke. We know that Jesus was dealing with an increasing number of critics; we know that searching for the lost, keeping dinner company with sinners and outcasts and welcoming those who had made mistakes and wandered far from home made him a target for the seriously righteous.

Today's gospel meaning depends somewhat on where you enter the story – which category of needs and wants you might most identify with. If you are the master your bottom line financials just took a hit but you might be looking for an employee who isn't above cheating a little. If you are one of those who needs a lot of debts forgiven you might be looking at this as a turnaround moment; you have found a friend in an unexpected place who understands the burdens of maximum taxes and a greedy employer. If you are the one who forgave the debts and kept your job, who resisted the norms and were praised for being clever, you might be wondering what act of generosity you might risk the next time. (Those who study the first century economic landscape for peasants have suggested that the shrewd steward was protesting the greed of the master and chose solidarity with the poor laborers thus insuring that he would have friends when he joined the unemployment line).

Jesus always seems to be risking generosity; he forgives and reconciles recklessly and bypasses right beliefs, synagogue membership, social standing and the book of rules. No wonder he had his critics. He prayed often, for everybody, and just did what he was called to do from the center of God's grace.

What if, wonders Brackett, the job of the church in training disciples and shaping Christian character is to help us learn to be agents of generosity? Perhaps you know about Juan Mann, the founder of the Free Hugs movement. A young Australian, he was pretty depressed one night when an unexpected embrace turned his life around. He carried that act of generosity forward into a busy shopping area where with his little sign he stood and waited for those who would risk a hug. There have been many iterations all over the world and if you Google Free Hugs Campaign you can see the faces of the resisters and the recipients. I was at Center 507 in Lowertown this week to meet with a colleague in the United Church. Suddenly I was embraced in a bear hug by one of the interns in the drop in center. It happened to be Josh Bridges who went with us on the second trip to New Orleans. Two young women standing in the doorway had watched this hug as they waited for their lunch. One of them said, Hey, do you know about the free hug guy on the web? And before I knew it I was giving away two more hugs, not minding that my own shirt then smelled of them all through my privileged not soup kitchen lunch.

What if we gave away the other church stuff like communion or ashes for Ash Wednesday? I scandalized a bishop at General Synod this summer when I described Common Cathedral in Boston where a cart of supplies and willing church folk offer the riches of the church indiscriminately to all. I have memories of folks hanging on the cart and offering their own life wisdom to the sermon; I remember what it feels like to take the bread and wine to those who live on the park benches and to tourists who watched

from a safe distance. “Would you like communion today?” “Yes, I would. Thank you.” The parish of St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco takes the ashes of Ash Wednesday and healing prayers to the subway stations for those who might want a touch of the holy in the unexpected place.

Can we give away forgiveness? Break the cycle of holding on to past wounds? Can we release the load of expectations we place on the lives of others? Can we just do it? Pray often, for everyone, take it to the next step of action? Can we allow God to birth in us a willingness, a courage, to give away the center of what God offers to us? Then there is a balm in Gilead.

The church is always going to be asking you for your time, your talent, your treasure. But you don't have to wait to be asked. Just do it. And the heart of the Holy One will be glad.

Amen+

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