

Sermon
Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Sunday, September 21st, 2025
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: JEREMIAH 8:18-9:1; PSALM 79:1-9; 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-7; LUKE 16:1-13

What is one of the hardest things to do in this life? This is a question that my friend Bryon - who is sitting right here in the front - often asks me. He's pretty sure of the answer too, aren't you Bryon? Bryon's answer is "To be yourself". To be yourself. I'd change that a little to say "to be ourselves" - ourselves, together. Ourselves in communion and community with God and each other and our world. Not "your", but "our", and not "I", but "we".

At the end of his book "The Wounded Healer", Henri Nouwen says this:

"...when the imitation of Christ does not mean to live a life like Christ, but to live your life as authentically as Christ lived his, then there are many ways and forms in which a man can be a Christian."

Not striving to live just as Jesus did - none of us can live the fullness of Christ - but to live as authentically as Jesus did: being ourselves, our fullest, "best", most authentic selves. Jesus shows us how to do this!

What does "being ourselves" have to do with the parable of the shrewd (or dishonest) manager that we've just heard? What does this have to do with Jeremiah's lament, and a longing for a balm in Gilead? What does "being ourselves" have to do with Paul's Letter to Timothy?

I love what Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber says about parables:

"Parables...aren't to be studied and interpreted so much as to be experienced. We don't figure them out; they figure us out. A parable is like a living thing—a growing organism of meaning...you can dissect it to try to understand it. But to do so is to kill it."

What is the parable we've just heard meant to work in us? What does this story show us about money? About choices and priorities? About relationships? How does this parable help us to be ourselves?

The word used to describe the manager in this story is *phronimos* in Greek, and this is translated approximately, as shrewd. It comes from the verb *phroneo*, which simply means to think, to use one's brain. There is no malice in this description; the manager is simply being intelligent.

At the time Jesus was telling this story farmers were exploited by Roman authorities and they were expected to reap far more than was realistic from the land. This created crushing debt. The shrewd manager's job would have been to go and collect those crushing, unrealistic debts. He uses his head to be shrewd - or creative - in collecting the debts. He frees the debtors from some of the burden of what they owe, and he forges relationships, connections with them in doing this. His actions have both head and heart in them!

What if Jesus is showing us in this parable that the way to be ourselves is to use our heads and hearts together?

Our Gospel passage today ends with the statement "You cannot serve God and wealth." This is definitely an either/or statement. This has us ask "to what end are we earning and spending money?" Is there heart in what we expect from money? Is there both head and heart in how we spend our money?

Our passage from Jeremiah brings us the famous line "Is there no balm in Gilead?" Jeremiah is asking "Is there no healing, no wholeness for God's people?" This longing for healing and wholeness, for a balm to soothe wounds and brokenness is as deep as ever in our hearts today. On its own, money will never fulfil that longing. Money on its own cannot bring healing and wholeness. It is approaching money with both head and heart that will do that! Part of truly being ourselves is recognizing this, and giving our hearts to God and to each other and to our world, not to money and wealth. Part of being ourselves is using our heads - and our money - creatively, and lovingly.

In the First Letter to Timothy, Paul urges "...that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone...". This is a reminder that

we are all connected, and that we all need prayer. Praying has us bring head and heart together, and it is a means of connection - with God, and with each other. Part of being ourselves is recognizing the power and potential in prayer. Part of being ourselves has us stop creating divisions in our hearts and our minds and prayer is one way that we work toward this.

Back to the parable of the shrewd manager. He was up against a rigid and unjust system in that first century world. Instead of lamenting the system, he worked within it for good - for relationship and connection. Jesus was up against that same system, and in his suffering and death and resurrection he showed us that God's love is stronger than any worldly, any human system, stronger than anything. Jesus is God's invitation to us into loving relationship. Jesus shows us how much we are loved, and he shows us how to be in the world, as only we can: as ourselves: beloved, and ready to love. Ready to use our heads - the minds we've been given - creatively, courageously, to further God's mission, to bring God's Kingdom here on earth. Ready to use our hearts to choose empathy and compassion. Ready to use our heads and hearts together not to imitate Jesus, but to let him show us how we can be ourselves in his name, in the name of peace, justice and love.

This morning, in our prayer and song and sacrament, may our heads and hearts be united. May we all know how much we are loved, and how much potential there is in us to love. May we trust in the creativity and courage of our heads - our minds. May we feel the tenderness of Christ encouraging us, sustaining and upholding us in heart, mind and soul. May we go out into the world and live with head and heart together, joining with God's mission to bring healing and peace and justice to our world in creative and courageous ways. May we all be ourselves - as only we can be - in Jesus name. Amen.

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