

## Dual Citizenship: Citizens of this World and of the Kingdom of God

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September 18, 2016

One week ago Libby Mooney stood here and shared with us the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son, better known as the Prodigal Son – all most familiar lessons, comfortable to revisit, and clear in their teachings. Our scripture lessons for today, which you just heard from Becky Lenz, are not so. In fact they pull us in different directions including those which are not comfortable at times. In my study across the past few days, I have found that their teachings and interpretations vary. Our lesson from the Old Testament, from the prophet Jeremiah, speaks of God's sadness and pain over the choices Israel is making, weeping, because she seems unable to reach them. Then, researching the Gospel according to Luke, I actually found one commentary by Greg Carey from WorkingPreacher.org where he remarked that the Parable of the dishonest (corrupt) manager stands among the most challenging texts in the New Testament, and is often regarded it as the most perplexing of Jesus' parables.

"Great", you say, "all we ever needed to do was get up early - come to church – and be faced with materials that raise questions...". But there is more to consider here. Why are these materials difficult? Where I begin, is in realizing that we live in a world where we seek to succeed, a world where we seek comfort, where we seek security, and where we are hungry for love and approbation. God made us that way. And there is nothing wrong with any of that.

The confusion – or at least some of it – arises when we realize that we live in a world that God created and loves, a world where we have been given free will... to live and delight in this world, and free will to take care of it. In addition, we live in world in which we are called to also love God and neighbor. Given all this, how then shall we live?

Having now entered into these questions, without all the answers, let us turn to our God in prayer. God take our minds and think through them, take my lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire with the desire to know and to live your will. Amen.

It is my belief, that the challenges which our lessons provide today are important to our way of living right now. They touch on questions we all face, and decisions we all make - daily.

Let's begin with Jeremiah. Jeremiah's lesson today is not the simple command, as it was a couple of weeks ago, to praise God. Jeremiah's message to Israel speaks of God's sadness and grief. God is heartsick at his people's hurt. Israel has been making choices which are other than faithful, and that are leading toward her destruction.

Jeremiah, himself, may also not be feeling too great about the results of his prophesying across time. The painful truth, is that Israel may not be the people they think themselves to be, they are not living up to the convictions that they have professed. And here, in the midst of their hurting, God's sadness shakes them up from their complacency. Here, they are being directed to turn around in their ways. Again, here, we find God's suffering like a parent who loves his children and hopes for them to find their way.

I wonder, what would God like to see us doing? What decisions would God like to see us change? Our children are being taught in school to make good decisions. We encourage that, and we sometimes describe the places where they fall down, as time when they have not made good decisions. Might we apply the same question to ourselves? Where do we cause our God to grieve? But in all this, let us notice, that while our God grieves, she does not give up. To quote our choir this morning, "He, watching over Israel, neither slumbers nor sleeps". God stays right with them, despite their decisions or actions. And I believe, God does the same with us in this time.

Jeremiah's exhortations on God's behalf, are a good introduction to our reading now from Luke. Here we have a rich man, (representing God,) who had a manager. We then learn that charges were brought to the rich man saying that this manager was squandering his property. So the rich man summoned the manager, and announced that he would not be continuing in his position anymore.

Now see what does the manager does. Two things. His relationship/friendship with the rich man seems to be at an end, so he turns to make friends, to create new relationships, by summoning his master's debtors, and reducing their debts. The result? The rich man, then received less, and the poor had their debts reduced, even paid off. And then, rather than see the rich man as one who had been duped (as citizens of this world) , we now see the rich man more in the role of God. Here God's wealth and largesse had been lessened – or might we say "used" or "shared", to relieve others in need, and the man had also begun to build relationships with those in need. To this, God rises up and commends the previously dishonest manager hoping that those who learn from this parable will look to sharing their wealth and God's blessings with those in need, - dishonest (labels of this world) if we look to a relationship that had been built on making a profit, and building up riches, but faithful and kind, if we look at it now from God's perspective, and the perspective of those words we say in the Lord's Prayer, first, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven", and then, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors".

How did you first hear this lesson? Were you, as was I at first, struck by the manger being dishonest, as he reduced the debt to be received for the rich man from the debtors? Did we run first into the value system of this world, and not God's?

What else does this lesson bring up? It has been pointed out that people often purchase friendship for themselves at the expense of others. How do we live with

the riches God bestows? How do we be family, friends, and treat all as brothers and sisters? One thing we are not so good at is talking about money. Our society holds many different understandings about this. I remember a roommate of mine, when I was first out teaching, preparing for her wedding. She went home one weekend, and spoke with her mother. She wanted to talk about finances of beginning a marriage and how her mother and father had made their way. And her mother's response..."but dear. Don't you know that it is rude to talk about money? We don't talk about such things." And that ended the conversation. The admonition not to talk about money, or it being rude to talk about money is part of tradition, I hope now, belonging to the past.

However, - (and yes, maybe I am trying to do a little ground-breaking for stewardship) - the church of today where life is lively and love and caring are tangible, - is a place where people live together in the fullness of their lives. We share our joys and concerns, our time, talent and treasure, in short, our whole lives. Jesus was teaching that through this parable and in many other of his stories. The feeding of the five thousand - was a miracle begun by Jesus telling his disciples to give away all the food they had. The widow's mite, also tells of giving all you have. The list goes on. Our parable for today praises shrewdness - careful looking at what we are doing, not squandering, and doing so mindful of others. The proclamation of God's kingdom was meant to be good news for the poor. How do we bring that into today?

Our lesson concludes with the teaching that whoever is faithful in very little, is faithful also in much. It teaches that no one can serve two masters, you cannot serve God and wealth.

So how do we live with our blessings? Our human "dual citizenship" which has been a challenge across time since the creation of humankind.

Our lesson also teaches whoever is faithful in very little, is also faithful in much; and whoever is dishonest in very little is dishonest also in much.

I'd like to tell you a story - it's been a few weeks since I shared a story. This time about the Craig family - as we were preparing to send our oldest daughter off to college. And this is a story where we did indeed talk about money.

We had paid the fall tuition bill, and now were preparing to bring Taylor to school. In an effort to be economical, Taylor suggested that I take her and a friend to BJ's to buy the supplies they would need for the fall - you know toothpaste, shampoo, socks, etc. Taylor had also been tasked by her three other roommates-to-be to provide a small cube size refrigerator for their room. The others had other assignments. Well, we went shopping, found the necessary items, and then went to the check-out counter. All went smoothly...until I saw a bill being produced that was a little more than three hundred dollars. This college thing was beginning to be a bit nerve-wracking. But, her friend assured me, that she would pay her share promptly. We left the cashier, were then checked out by the door person, loaded our car and headed for home. Once home, we unpacked the car and reviewed the sales slip for Taylor's friend. And it was then that we realized - that we had not paid for the

refrigerator. Financial angst then struck. What to do? One opinion from a pastor friend stopping by was that perhaps we should do nothing, so that the door checker would not get in trouble. We considered that. College expenses were adding up. (Both this world concerns.) When Brad got home, we talked it through again, and concluded that we really had to go back and pay for that refrigerator. After all, it was not just an error on the part of the door checker. We had not pointed it out to the cashier, and she had missed it, as well. Sooo, the next morning, we headed out for BJ's with receipt in hand. Walking in the store, we headed for the Customer Services desk. Brad, and I, and Taylor and Libby filed in - not sure what to expect. We got up to the desk and told our story, to which the service manager called the person next to him, saying "Hey, Mike. Come over here a minute. You have to see this." Well, we finally did pay for that refrigerator, and we have had a family story about money ever since. No one lost their jobs or was penalized. And responding to incidents like this has always called this story to mind.

You know, I think that Jesus was trying in some way to do the same. Giving people a story and an experience to turn to, guiding us in our dual citizenship, and dealing once with these questions makes the next decision in the same vein, easier.

So what to do? I'd like to suggest that we begin right where we are and try to be faithful with whatever crosses our paths, asking ourselves, how shall we live in this world, loving God and neighbor, and as Pope Francis has added, the earth. Today, I would like to challenge each of us to find one way to act faithfully this week, to love God, love our neighbor, and/or to care for the earth. Then share the story of your efforts - and questions - with your families and friends, as together we sort out how to be God's beloved creation. Amen.