**First Presbyterian Church of Pittsford**

**September 18, 2016**

**Summer Is Ended**

**Jeremiah 8:14-9:1**

**Luke 16:1-12**

A man dies and goes to heaven. Peter meets him at the pearly gates.

Peter says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you have done and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."   
  
"OK", the man said. "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and   
never cheated on her, even in my heart. I made enough money to support her, our 3 kids and 6 grandkids comfortably."   
  
That's wonderful", said St Peter. "That's worth three points!"   
  
"Three points?" he says. "Well, I attended church all my life and   
supported its ministry with my tithe and service."   
  
"Terrific!" says Peter. "That's certainly worth a point."

"One point? I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter   
for homeless veterans."   
  
"Fantastic, that's good for two more points", Peter says.   
  
"Two points?" the man cried, "At this rate the only way I can get into   
heaven is by the grace of God."   
  
"Bingo, 100 points! Come on in!"

1. Stories of meeting Peter at the Pearly Gates are part of our human mythology because they address our concern of being judged and the fear we all have of being found wanting.
   1. Our very own Bill Gavett used to regale the High School students with tales of Grace, the clerk who met new arrivals at the Gates of Heaven and showed them how many gold pages were present in each person’s life story.
   2. Each of us hope to hear from God, as the servant in Matthew’s Parable of the Talents did, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.”
   3. Truth be told: if God were to judge any one of us today and give us what we deserve, we would all be dancing in Dante’s Inferno.
   4. On the face of things, our parable for today might sound as if it were a tutorial from Jesus on how to shrewdly ensure our receiving a good accounting for our lives.
   5. But commentators will tell you that this Bible passage is confusing.
   6. Our Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah is just as confusing.
      1. Think of it as a three-part lament.
   7. Thanks to Pastor Bruce for dramatically voicing the weeping prophet’s lament over Judah, the southern kingdom which continues to turn away from God’s teaching and turn towards its own shrewd wisdom to merit a positive final accounting.
   8. Thanks to Dr. Frank for poignantly voicing God’s bewilderment over Judah repeatedly provoking God’s anger by choosing to serve mere images and idols, but not the living and loving God.
   9. I was the voice of the people whining to God because we think God is not behaving the way we expect.
      1. You would think by now that with God, and particularly the parables of Jesus, we should expect the unexpected.
      2. A wonderful and bible savvy congregant texted me this week saying, “Hope your message Sunday is on the Parable from Luke because I don't understand it.”
2. This parable of the shrewd manager is hard to understand.
   1. Only Luke tells this parable.
   2. The chapter begins with “There was a rich man who had a manager…”
      1. So we have two main players and Jesus is the narrator of the parable.
   3. The Rich Man summons the Manager demanding an accounting of his management before the Manager will be let go.
   4. The manager talks to himself and devises a plan so that ‘when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’
   5. The manager then summons the Master’s debtors and tells them to reduce their bills and pay just a portion.
   6. Here comes the really confusing part in verse 8:
      1. “And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.”
         1. Huh?
         2. Is Jesus trying to say we should dishonestly cut corners and cheat the master, a.k.a. God, in what we owe God?
      2. By no means.
      3. The dishonest manager is commended not for his dishonesty but for his shrewdness *in dealing with his own generation* as verse 8 tells us.
         1. The manager, the regular human in this two-character parable of God and humanity, gets God’s approval for humanly and imperfectly making the most of a terrible situation for himself and his fellow humans.
   7. When Jesus started the parable, Jesus called the Master, “the Rich Man” and with that moniker we think of all the negative stereotypes of a rich man.
      1. The rich man is probably an absentee landlord, a despot, and a slave-driver.
      2. This rich man, hearing charges that his manager has been squandering his property, fires him on the spot and demands that the steward should give an accounting of his books.
         1. Remember our theme of accounting for our life when we reach the pearly gates?
   8. The manager is given no hearing, no opportunity to respond to his accusers.
      1. And that, plus all of our negative images of rich men -- that evokes our sympathy for the manager.
      2. We identify with the manager, the little man against the big man.
      3. We the hearers are even drawn into the manager's mind: "What will I do?" he asks himself.
   9. What the manager decides to do is to pull off a "sting."
      1. The manager becomes a rogue, a Robert Redford rogue.
      2. Remember that movie, The Sting, and how delighted we were when Robert Redford and his band of petty criminals pulled off a "sting" on the big bad guy?
      3. The manager is a rogue: yeah, a little unethical maybe, but more in a fun-loving, mischievous, common-man-getting-back-at-the-rich sort of a way.
      4. He is Robin Hood, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor.
      5. Just as we applauded Robert Redford, we're rooting for the manager against his master.
   10. So our roguish manager takes the master's books and works out a deal with each of his master's debtors:
       1. "You owe one hundred jugs of olive oil?
          1. Take your bill and write down fifty."
       2. "You owe one hundred containers of wheat?
          1. Scratch out the hundred and write down eighty."
       3. And when the master finds out about the sting?
          1. Oh, will he be ticked!
       4. He'll throw that manager into prison, maybe even worse!
       5. But no, surprisingly, that's not what happens.
       6. "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."
   11. That catches us off guard, doesn't it?
       1. It causes us to toss out all of our preconceived stereotypes.
       2. Maybe the rich guy isn't so bad after all?
       3. And our roguish friend, the manager, was, after all, dishonest and unethical, wasn't he?
       4. Who's the good guy in this story and who's the bad guy?
       5. And even more importantly: what does this story say about you and me, we who were cheering on the rogue, willing to look the other way while he was doctoring the books?
       6. Maybe you and I are rogues as well?
          1. Well, if we are rogues, we have every reason to be thankful for a merciful master, who is willing to commend us when we work together with our fellow rogues to make the most of the messiness of life.
3. Like Jeremiah, we have every reason to lament the messiness of life.[[1]](#footnote-1)
   1. 1/2 of the world’s population — more than 3 billion people — live on less than $2.50 a day. More than 1.3 billion live in extreme poverty — less than $1.25 a day.
   2. 1 billion children worldwide are living in poverty. According to UNICEF, 22,000 children die each day due to poverty.
   3. More than 750 million people lack adequate access to clean drinking water.
      1. Diarrhea caused by inadequate drinking water, sanitation, and hand hygiene kills an estimated 842,000 people every year globally, or approximately 2,300 people per day.
   4. 1/4 of all humans live without electricity — approximately 1.6 billion people.
   5. Oxfam estimates that it would take $60 billion annually to end extreme global poverty--that's less than 1/4 the income of the top 100 richest billionaires.
   6. According to the World Food Program, hunger is the number one cause of death in the world, killing more than HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis combined.
4. In light of this lament and the difficult choices we face, just as the shrewd manager faced, what then can we do?
   1. We can recognize that we are all in this “summer-is-ended” situation together.
      1. Life is not as care-free as we might wish.
   2. Paul urges Timothy and us “that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone… so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.” (1 Timothy 2:1)
   3. Jeni Stepien had a “summer-is-ended” experience in September 2006 when her father was murdered.
      1. As her father was dying in the hospital, her family decided to accept the inevitable and donate his organs through an organization called the Center for Organ Recovery and Education.
         1. CORE allows donor families and the recipients to keep in touch with one another.
      2. Mr. Stepien’s heart went to Arthur Thomas, a father of four living in Lawrenceville, NJ who was in congestive heart failure.
         1. Mr. Thomas, a faculty member at the private Lawrenceville boarding school, did as Paul urges and wrote a letter of thanksgiving to the Stepiens.
         2. From there, a relationship was forged through monthly phone calls, emails and letters.
         3. The families did not consider meeting in person until Jeni Stepien became engaged and she wondered who would walk her down the aisle.
      3. At the advice of her fiancé, Jeni wrote Mr. Thomas asking him to walk her down the aisle and he agreed.
         1. As they walked down the aisle, Jeni gripped his wrist where she would feel her dad’s heart beating strongest.
      4. Arthur Thomas’ thanksgiving led to a peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.[[2]](#footnote-2)
5. By contrast, what if we don’t recognize our common “summer-is-ended” situation?
   1. Let’s play out what happened to Jeremiah’s people, those to whom he was prophesying, but they were not responding.
      1. Pastor Bruce read for us Jeremiah’s querulous query, “Is there no balm in Gilead?”
      2. Dr. Frank voiced God’s disappointedly pained response.
   2. History tells us Judah was overrun.
      1. The people were sent into exile in Babylon.
6. What might have happened if the people of Judah HAD listened to the prophet Jeremiah?
   1. What if they had done as Paul urges, to give thanks for everyone, to make choices based on God’s wisdom found in prayerful conversation with God?
      1. What do you think would have happened if the Judean characters had played out that play?
      2. We have a clue right here in our worship.
      3. We all sang it together.
   2. When we join together in worship we can affirm “There is a balm in Gilead”
   3. Let us do as Jeremiah warns, Jesus teaches and Paul urges to heal our sin-sick souls together, relying on God’s grace.
      1. Bingo, 100 points, Come on in!

1. https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-global-poverty [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Katie Rogers. “A Wedding with a Donated Heart at Its Center.” *New York Times.* August 14, 2016. Page SS12. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)