

If NOTHING is WRONG, THEN SOMETHING is WRONG!

Sermon, September 19, 2010

Texts: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13

In T.S. Eliot's play "The Cocktail Party," one of the main characters is a woman by the name of Celia. An accomplished woman, Celia is searching after some happiness and meaning in her life, and she has made her way through the round of entertainment, theatre, receptions, cocktail parties and other activities that London has to offer. She seems to have it all, yet she is tired of it all. She is profoundly aware something is missing. Finally, Celia goes to see a psychiatrist. After months of weekly sessions in which she pours out her heart, the psychiatrist finally tells Celia he can find nothing wrong. Celia's response? She laments, "If nothing is wrong, then something is very wrong!" How many of you have experienced that level of frustration in the doctor's office? You go to the doctor with various symptoms, and after running all sorts of tests ... blood tests, CT scans, EKGs, MRIs, EEGs, ABCDEFGs ... he tells you "Nothing is wrong." Something IS wrong, something is not right in your body, that's why you're there in the first place, and the doctor says, "Nothing is wrong." Don't you just want to wring his neck?

The full quotation of Celia: "I should really like to think there's something wrong with me. Because, if there isn't, then there's something wrong, Or at least, very different from what it seemed to be, With the world itself — and that's much more frightening!" That, by the way, seems to be T.S. Eliot's commentary on life in general. If nothing is wrong, then something is really wrong! This sentiment was succinctly well-echoed in a column I read eleven years ago. Syndicated columnist Thomas Sowell wrote in September 1999, "When I saw Monica Lewinski listed among the Ten Most Admired Women in America, I knew that I was no longer living in the country I grew up in. Maybe someone as foreign as me should apply for a green card."

If nothing is wrong, then *something* is very wrong.

Jeremiah was trying to get his people to see something was wrong. Of all of the Biblical prophets, Jeremiah is the most tragic; he is known as the weeping prophet. He not only saw judgment coming, he had to live through it himself; he was there when the Babylonians came and conquered. Jeremiah's career spanned more than four decades. All along he could see how his people were abandoning God and abandoning morality, and by God's spirit he could see clear as day what that all meant and where it was all heading and where it all would end up. Throughout it all, though, Jeremiah spoke up and spoke out, hoping that some would hear, that some would take action and do something to change their ways before it was too late. He was one of the most colorful of the Old Testament prophets, often using vivid and unique visual aids to reinforce his messages; for example, Jeremiah tells the people "You have the brazen look of a prostitute." (Jeremiah 3:3) The RSV translates it, "You have the forehead of a harlot," or, as the King James renders it, "Thou hadst a whore's forehead." What is meant by that imagery? In short, it means they have lost the capacity to blush. It means nothing seems to embarrass or shame them anymore; nothing is too shocking for them. The people would not listen to Jeremiah, many of his own townspeople, even some of his kin, opposed him and tried to shut him up.

Jeremiah asks, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?" As mentioned before our previous hymn, Gilead was a region of ancient Israel renowned for this healing ointment made from the resinous gum of a kind of balsam tree indigenous to the area. Physicians in Gilead would apply that balm to effect healing and restoration to health. (*"Balm of Gilead" is mentioned in Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven"; the narrator believes the "balm in Gilead" can heal his broken heart, because he is lamenting the death of his love, Lenore.*) The prophetic imagery here is of people who are morally diseased and need to go to the doctor to seek healing. They are warned by Jeremiah to repent and turn to the divine Physician ... and they've refused. *Is there no balm in Gilead?* Of course there is. God was still present as a healing presence, ready to apply the balm of His gracious mercy, awaiting the people's return. And God is still present today, waiting for repentance so redemption and new life can occur in all of our lives. God is still present, awaiting that moment when we recognize just how wrong things are, and decide to take action to change.

I recently read a story about an enterprising young man in Montana who bought a horse from a farmer for \$100. The farmer agreed to deliver the horse the next day. However, when the next day arrived, the farmer told him, "I'm afraid the horse has died." The young man said, "Well, then give me my money back." The farmer said, "Can't. I spent it already." The young man thought for a moment and said, "OK, then, just bring me the dead horse." The farmer asked, "What you going to do with a dead horse?" The young man said, "Just bring it to me. I paid for it." A month later, the farmer met up with the young man and asked, "Whatever happened with that dead horse?" The young man said, "I ruffled him off. I sold 500 tickets at two dollars apiece, and made an overall profit of \$898." The farmer said, "Didn't anyone complain?" The young man said, "Just the guy who won. I told him, 'I didn't say it was a *live* horse, but since you didn't seem to know that, I'll be generous; I'll give you your two dollars

back.' So that \$2 minus the original \$100 investment left me a net gain of \$898." Now, there's an enterprising young man! A borderline crook, maybe, but an enterprising young man.

Frankly, that young man sounds something like the manager in the parable this morning. You remember the story; there was a rich man who had a manager for his estate. This manager, unfortunately, was a bit lax in his oversight of his master's affairs. The master finally decided he had had enough. This manager really deserved to go. The master called this manager in, and told him to provide an accounting of his work, pretty much guaranteeing that his job was finished. It's important to note, though, the manager was apparently given a grace period to sort things out; he wasn't fired on the spot by the master. The terrified manager was beside himself. "What shall I do now?" he wondered to himself. "My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg." So, he hatched a plan, taking advantage of this small window of time. He called in each of his master's debtors. He asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" "Eight hundred gallons of olive oil," the first debtor replied. The manager told him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred." Then he asked the second, "And how much do you owe?" "One thousand bushels of wheat," he replied. The manager said, "Take your bill and make it eight hundred."

His sense of survival was kicking in at full speed! Before the word got out he was being fired, he used his privileged position and this short window of opportunity to buy himself some good will so he would have somewhere to turn when he was out of a job. Remember how Jesus ended this little tale: *"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."* Now, we know this is Jesus' parable, and we know that sometimes Jesus thought outside the box, but did we hear this right? The master commended the dishonest manager? It seems a divine endorsement of the ends justifying the means. Is nothing wrong, here? If nothing is wrong here, then something is wrong! For more than 2,000 years earnest scholars, industrious Bible study leaders and brave preachers have struggled with this parable. I'll admit, I haven't fallen into that last category...I've never preached on it (until today). This is arguably the strangest story Jesus ever told! I mean, it sure sounds like Jesus is pointing to this scoundrel and saying to His disciples, "Here's somebody you need to learn from!" How could He do that? What are we missing?

One interesting observation by scholars has led to one somewhat plausible explanation: Note the contract for eight hundred gallons of olive oil is cut in half; the bill for a thousand bushels of wheat is reduced by two hundred. Some scholars tell us these aren't random reductions. Each of these reductions has about the same monetary value: roughly 500 denarii. In other words, 200 bushels of wheat and 800 gallons of olive oil are *both* worth 500 denarii on the market. It's quite possible this amount would have been the manager's combined commission had he stayed on the job for the duration of the loan contracts involved. He just lopped off the 500 denarii's worth from each settlement package that would have made up his salary. In the eyes of the debtors (*and by the time the Master finds out*) the manager looks good, and the master looks good ... everybody thinks they are both wonderful ... and the master gets the principle back. Everyone is happy! What a story!

I really don't know if that's the right explanation, but the bottom line is that this man knew he was about to face an accounting, and he prepared for it in the time he had left. Here's one key, though: he prepared for it by banking on the mercy and generosity of the master. He knew he deserved to lose his job. The master was merciful, though, in not firing him on the spot and *giving him time to prepare for the accounting*. He took advantage of the time he had, taking action the best he knew how, and Jesus praised him for it! Jesus liked people who took action. The manager knew judgment was coming, and he acted the best he knew how, which included availing himself of what he knew about his master's generosity. The master's generosity had given this incompetent manager time to put his affairs in order. The master apparently had a reputation for generosity, because the debtors readily believed the manager changed the terms of the bills in their favor with the master's approval. They probably said to themselves, "Well, how about that. Isn't that like Mr. Master! He's a generous man, all right!" And in the end, we can imagine the crowds gathering at the master's house celebrating the master's great generosity.

Now, due to time constraints there's much I haven't touched on in this parable or its application(s), other than to underscore Jesus liked people of action, but it IS an important point. Lord knows we have enough hand-wringers in the world! You know who I'm talking about: people of *in*-action who look at problems around them or at impending disasters and say, "Dear me, isn't it awful, somebody ought to do something." Well, yes; somebody *should* do something. WE should do something! We should do what we can in the time we have to try and set things right. To tie these two rather disparate stories from our lectionary readings together in the remaining few moments we have: Is there no balm in Gilead? Of course there is. Through Jesus Christ, the Divine Physician is still present as a healing presence. God is present, awaiting that moment when you and I recognize just how wrong things are, repent, and decide to take action to set things right in the time that we have remaining.

We will all be called into account some day. Receive the healing balm of God's grace in Jesus Christ, and take action the best you know how, based on what you know of your Master's gracious generosity. Amen.