

September 18, 2016
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "What is our Balm in Gilead?"

“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.”

Not much wiggle room there.

Jesus does not allow for the occasional lie or misspeak.

He doesn't say that it is hard to serve two masters; he says you cannot serve two masters.

One of the reasons that Christians are often charged with being hypocritical is that Jesus expects us to be better than we often are.

When you read through our holy scriptures you find values of truth, compassion, forgiveness and generosity that are hard to uphold in today's world.

When I read through the scripture for this morning I was troubled by the negative impact the psalmist's lament, Jeremiah's discourse and Jesus' admonition might have on you.

I want church to be a place that you come to feel comforted, supported, cared for – not beat up for the human frailties we all share.

As I thought about it I realized that admitting to our human brokenness might be the most supportive thing we can do.

Acknowledging that we are less than perfect and that we struggle with serving more than one master might humble us enough to reach for **the** master for support.

In today's readings we get two different perspectives of wandering from God.

Jeremiah draws strict lines between right and wrong.

He promotes an ideal of the whole community embracing God's commandments and putting God first in their lives.

Jeremiah, no doubt, was often weary with his attempt to bring his followers to perfection.

Almost 700 years later we have Luke's account of the rich man and his clever steward.

The rich man, starts off by holding his manager accountable for his deceitful behavior, however when the manager comes up with a wily plan to protect himself, his employer is impressed.

The rich man has fallen prey to the dangerous standard of 'outcome measures.'

Jesus warns that it is not only the results that matter, but the process as well.

Our society has drifted into this 'outcome measure' mentality.

Our sense of communal accountability has eroded.

We see in our public figures an uncanny ability to do whatever is needed to get to where they are going, regardless of the cost.

As long as the end product is impressive, no one seems to mind.

Whether it is lying politicians, athletes using drugs or businesses ruining our earth, we have accepted a culture of apology, rather than a culture of integrity.

People joke about being someone who asks for forgiveness rather than permission.
But the humorous characterization leaves out the option of being a person of integrity:

A person who does what is ethically right simply because it is the moral thing to do.

Our move toward individualization, always putting ourselves first, has eroded our sense of communal well-being.

In the 18th century, worship services started with the pastor naming the people in the congregation who had sinned in the previous week.

Those sinners were called out and had to spend the service standing in front of their community – essentially being shamed for their individual actions, which were deemed to have had a negative impact on the gathered community.

Obviously, we've eased up on that – but the question remains, 'To whom are we accountable?'

I attended a workshop this week on understanding the concept of culture.

The speaker defined culture as "being made up of value sets which influence behavior to create a way of life held in common."

I like a definition that says culture is the way people choose to order their lives.

How do we order our lives?

What are the unspoken rules of our life together?

What happens when they are violated?

We say our prayer of confession in unison to signify that we admit to one another that we are less than perfect.

Our silent confessions provide an opportunity to come before God with our sins.

We are all sinners.

I do not say that in a judgmental way, but in a loving way.

We can each find a bit of ourselves in the clever steward, seeking both reward and recognition.

As humans, humility is rarely our first instinct.

We must work at developing both integrity and humility.

Our faith tradition teaches us that it is God, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit who steps in to heal our brokenness.

I asked that we sing *There is a Balm in Gilead* because I wanted you to feel the relief that comes from placing yourself in God's care.

Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again. There is a balm in Gilead.

Gilead, in Jeremiah's time was located on the busy Transjordan trade route.

The local people controlled 'the King's highway.'

In order to get to the Gulf of Aqaba from Damascus travellers and merchants had to pass through the rugged territory of Gilead.

The people had turned from God's commandments and Jeremiah, experiencing divine suffering over their imminent destruction, cries out for a balm.

The hymn-written as an African American spiritual offers a long delayed answer to Jeremiah's question.

Yes, there is a balm in Gilead to soothe the sin-sick soul.

When we turn to God, seeking forgiveness, seeking comfort, God is there.

Like a child reaching for a parent for reassurance we reach out to God.

Is there a balm in Gilead? Is there a balm in Salisbury?

Yes.

The balm is you.

You are the one with the power to reach out to your neighbor and heal the wounds that weaken them.

You are the one who can make a choice to tell the truth.

You are the one who can offer mercy, forgiveness and grace to your friends.

You are the one made in the image of God.

Embrace it.

Nurture it.

Live it.