

Gaines Congregational United Church of Christ

September 18, 2022

Old Testament Reading; Jeremiah 8: 18 - 9: 1

Responsive Reading; Psalm 79: 1-9

Epistle Reading; 1 Timothy 2: 1-7

Gospel Reading; Luke 16: 1-13

Sermon Title: When All Else Fails, Read the Directions

By Rev. Jim Gardner

Summary; When you are up to your waist in alligators, it is sometimes hard to remember that your objective was to drain the swamp.

When I was a Deputy in the Wyoming County Sheriff's Department a fellow Sgt. on the force used to say, "When you look to the sky and say, 'Why me Lord?' A voice out of a cloud says, 'because you tick me off!'"

In our lesson from Jeremiah, God's answer was, "because THEY tick me off."

Jeremiah is hurting so bad because he sees the people of Israel in such distress. Jeremiah so wants their suffering to end although he knows that they have brought it upon themselves.

They had been given instructions of how to live a wholesome and rewarding life. Instead of doing what God had instructed them to do they tried to short-cut the process. God's people sought instant satisfaction and financial riches instead of permanent joy in spiritual riches.

In Deuteronomy 26: 16-19 God says, "This day the Lord your God commands you to observe these statutes and judgments; therefore, you shall be careful to observe them with all your heart and with all your soul.

"Today you have proclaimed the Lord to be your God, and that you will walk in His ways and keep His statutes, His commandments and His judgments, and that you will obey His voice.

"Also today the Lord has proclaimed you to be His special people, just as He promised you, that you should keep all His commandments, and that He will set you high above all nations which He has made, in praise, in name, and in honor, and that you may be a holy people to the Lord your God, just as He has spoken."

This was the contract. This was the promise. This is what God said He would do and this is what the people said they would do.

Unfortunately, too often people tend to think that talk is cheap and they are not obligated to keep their word.

Sounds like a politician the day after he or she is elected. OK, that was a cheap shot. Any-who.

Our Psalm reading echoes Jeremiah. This Psalm refers to a time where Jerusalem has been ravaged by pagan forces leaving that city in a condition that would make Ukraine look like an overzealous frat party. Like Jeremiah the Psalmist is pleading with God to bring relief while admitting that they had brought this destruction upon themselves. i.e. “Oh, do not remember our iniquities against us.”

Both Jeremiah and the Psalmist are asking for redemption that they know they do not deserve. These prayers would be answered in a stable many years from then. Oh, but I digress.

Our Epistle inserts some humility into our relationship with God. Paul says that Christians should not be “a Holier than thou” people and we should seek God’s mercy for all man-kind as apposed to just His special club. Paul also gives us ministers a little jab at our conscience. We, with Paul need to acknowledge, “I was appointed a preacher and a ‘witness’, we can’t quite

claim apostle, I am speaking the truth in Christ and not lying—a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.” Yes, we are held to a higher standard and I know that most of us take this very seriously.

Now comes the dilemma. How do we maintain a responsible relationship with God while we live in a real world with real requirements that we take care of ourselves and our families?

A dishonest steward has been caught skimming the profits and fudging the books of his master. Although it does not say so specifically, he probably has a family that he is responsible to take care of. There is nothing noble in letting your family starve just because you have screwed up. The steward comes up with a plan B. If he cannot support his family as he has in the past, he must figure another way to do it. He decides that if he can make enough friends that are indebted to him, they will repay him during his unemployment.

This may have been the inspiration for Optima Tax Relief.

The steward reduces the amount of debt that his master’s debtors owe him and they pay off the lesser amount immediately. The master gets money up front without having to invest in court action so the loss is actually negligible.

The master commends the steward, not for his dishonesty but for his shrewd business sense. The steward has kept his family

off the welfare roles and the master got some “up front” money that would not have been available if the steward had not made it happen.

God does not want us to neglect our responsibilities in this broken world and claim that it is the righteous thing to do. Jesus does not want us to be hermits living in a cave and not interacting with anyone else because we think they are unworthy of our friendship.

Sometimes life gets in the way. You may have a noble goal of something that you want to do for God and/ or humanity but then stuff happens. When you are up to your waist in alligators it can be hard to remember that your objective was to drain the swamp. Sometimes you have to address the alligator problem before you can drain the swamp.

When Nicodemus went to Jesus and Jesus told him that he had to be born again, Nicodemus could not understand it. Jesus said, “If I tell you earthly things and you do not believe, then how will you believe heavenly things if I tell them to you?” In the same light, if we do not take responsibility in human things how can we be trusted to be agents of the heavenly word?

In my life I have learned more from my failures and from getting fired than I have learned from praise. I now check the swamp for alligators before I go in and I buy Insurance before there is a claim to file. When we take care of business ahead of

time, we will not be distracted from spending face time with Jesus.

Drive your car like a cop is watching and live your life knowing that Jesus is right there with you. Hallelujah and Amen.