

Date: September 23, 2007

SUNDAY: Ordinary 25

SERMON: God's Faithfulness and Ours

Text(s): Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1; Luke 16:1-13

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When we were working as missionaries in Malaysia many years ago, Carol had a particularly nasty outbreak of eczema on her hands. The tropical climate wasn't good for anyone with a tendency toward skin allergies aggravated by heat and moisture, so it was something that she had to really watch out for, and even then, there were periodic outbreaks.

But during this particular outbreak, I was at a meeting with other clergy in town (some of whom were missionaries and some who were local clergy) to plan an ecumenical gathering of some kind, and one of the other people there was a missionary from Australia who came from a very evangelical, even Pentecostal tradition. Part of the gathering was a time of prayer, and we were invited to each request prayer for someone, so I requested prayer for Carol because of this nasty eczema outbreak. After the meeting, this woman from the Pentecostal tradition came to me and said, "Larry, I've been thinking about Carol's condition, and I'm convinced it must be something in your house."

I immediately agreed and said, "That's probably true, Margaret; our house is an old wooden bungalow, and in this climate, as you know, there is no shortage of mold of many varieties."

"No, no," she replied, "that's not what I meant. I meant that there is *something* in your house."

Baffled, I asked her to elaborate. She then asked me if we had any pua, which were handwoven blankets or wall hangings made by the various indigenous tribal peoples of Borneo, and I said, "Yes, as a matter of fact, we do have a lovely Iban pua hanging in our living room."

"That's it!" she replied, almost triumphantly. "And I'll bet it has those figures

that look like people woven into it, doesn't it?"

I replied that yes, it did have rows of human-like figures, very abstract ones, but recognizable nonetheless. "That's what's causing Carol's eczema," she replied. "Those figures are the *antu*— evil spirits. They're false gods or idols. So they're radiating evil power and you've got to get rid of them."

I was so taken aback, I wasn't quite sure how to respond. I realized immediately that in our views of reality, we were worlds apart, so rather than try to argue with her on theological or metaphysical grounds, or even logical grounds. (Why, for example, was neither I nor our children similarly affected?) I simply replied, "But Margaret, that pua was woven by faithful Methodist Iban women from Kapit I don't think they're into idolatry."

We don't think or talk much about idols these days, do we? Particularly not the sort that are carved from stone or wood or set up on altars. Such idols seem so, well, primitive or animistic. We certainly don't accord any reality or power to them. Yet I don't think John Calvin was far wrong when he declared that the human mind is an inexhaustible factory of idols. It's just that our idols tend to be more subtle than the carved or woven images of the *antu* we saw in Borneo, but they are no less real for all that. If worship attendance were one mark of faithfulness to one's gods, then what are we to make of the fact that on any given week, more people attend football games or shopping malls across America than there are who attend church or synagogue or mosque?

The lament of the prophet Jeremiah over the national catastrophe he saw looming over the kingdom of Judah was not only that the people of Judah were setting up shrines to Baal and Ashtoroth or Moloch, the Canaanite deities. It was what those shrines represented— a lack of trust in the living, though, invisible God who had brought them up out of slavery in Egypt with a mighty hand and had made covenant with them to bless them and multiply them and make them a

“light to the nations.” That lack of trust in God for their ultimate security, expressed through the religious cults of Baal and the other gods, was what lay behind their disastrous political policies, both domestic and foreign. Their unfaithfulness to God’s covenant weakened them as a nation and made them vulnerable to takeover by hostile foreign powers like Babylon. Domestically, they ignored the provisions in the law of God that enjoined social justice and care for the poor. Greedy self-interest was the order of the day instead. On the foreign policy front, Jeremiah warned them that with Babylon on the rise, they were being fools to try to make a military alliance with Egypt, the other great rival empire. They needed to keep a low profile, not be carried away by what they imagined military adventurism could bring them. They needed simply to be faithful to their own God, by modeling a society where justice and a commitment to the common good was the goal of both leaders and people.

But no, the leaders trust for security was not in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, nor was their commitment to the common good. They went ahead and formed a military alliance with Egypt, and this put them squarely in the crosshairs of the expansionist Babylonian power. Jeremiah saw it coming, and though he did his best to head it off, he was a prophet without honor in his own country. He was scorned, abused, and almost killed for his warnings. And when disaster struck, when Jerusalem lay in ruins, when the crops were devastated by the the horses and boots of the Babylonian armies, we hear this lament of the people and the prophet who speaks for God with whom they have not kept faith:

People: *We looked for peace, but no good came;
for a time of healing, but got only terror.
The harvest now is over,
the summer is ended,
and we are not saved.*

God: *For the hurt of my poor people, I am*

*hurt. I mourn and dismay has taken hold
of me.*

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no physician there?

*Why, then, is not the health of my poor
people restored?*

The clear implication of a grieving God’s question is that the popular healing ointment, the balm in Gilead and the spiritual physicians who will heal the wounds must arise from among the people themselves. God is hurt in our hurts; God is vulnerable with us in our vulnerability. Our hurts are caused by our own choices; our healing must come from our own choices also, and in the midst of both hurt and healing, God will be present with us, supporting us, encouraging us, suffering with us, if need be, but never forsaking us. The sign of God’s faithfulness to Israel was that Jeremiah, instead of turning his back on the people in disgust for having ignored his warnings and abused him sorely, chose to stay with the now leaderless people and help them rebuild their lives. He was a flesh-and-blood witness to God’s faithfulness.

In our Gospel lesson, the theme of faithfulness, both ours and God’s is also central. In the parable of the dishonest steward, we have to be careful not to quickly jump to identifying the master in the parable with God. Then we end up with God commending dishonesty. Jesus doesn’t commend the steward’s dishonesty, but his quick resourcefulness in recognizing and adapting to his new reality. Just so, Jesus says, the children of light must recognize the new reality of God’s kingdom of justice that is breaking in and be just as resourceful and quick to adapt. And the way to adapt is to be clear about who our real master is. We have a choice to make between two masters, it seems:

“Whoever is faithful in little is faithful in much. . . No servant can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

By now, we should be used to Jesus’

frequent teachings about wealth. It's a curious thing that in the gospels, Jesus talks more about money than any other subject, including sex, while today, the Church seems more obsessed with talking about sex and hardly has a word to say about a faithful relationship with money. The reason Jesus talked so much about money is just because money and the power or control it represents, is, and probably always has been, the chief rival to God for our love and faithfulness. It is the preeminent idol of our time, and probably of all times. And our reluctance to talk about money, the way we shroud it in secrecy, is probably a clear indication of just how deeply we are committed to it as the ultimate reality, the ultimate power in which we place our ultimate trust.

Rabbi Michael Lerner of Beyt Tikkun Synagogue in San Francisco has written eloquently on this theme, reminding us of our tendency to serve the wrong master, and thereby place our trust for security in the wrong god. (He wrote these words, by the way, not long after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 which make them even more resonant and poignant a commentary on our times.)

"We may tell ourselves that the current violence has 'nothing to do' with the way that we've learned to close our ears when told that one out of every three people on this planet does not have enough food, and that one billion are literally starving. We may reassure ourselves that the hoarding of the world's resources by the richest society in world history, and our frantic attempts to accelerate globalization with its attendant inequalities of wealth, has nothing to do with the resentment that others feel toward us. . . The same inability to feel the pain of others is the pathology that shapes the minds of these terrorists." (washmideast-request@halak.pcusa.org)

That really speaks to me about money's ability to offer us a powerful illusion of security. And illusion is the right word, isn't it? It's one of the most insidious effects of wealth that it

provides us with such comfortable insulation from the pain of the world. It's like a wall we build around ourselves to protect ourselves, and in the comfort that wealth provides, we can fool ourselves into thinking that we're safe. But sooner or later, that illusion shatters. Whether it's the violence of a terrorist attack on our country or the violence of a disease that takes hold of our body and threatens our life or the car accident that snatches away a loved one from us, suddenly the illusion manifests itself for what it really is, an illusion. The idol we've bowed down to comes crashing down, and is revealed as a god that cannot ultimately save us.

Yesterday, during our confirmation retreat, we asked the confirmands to write down some questions they had about God, about faith, about the Bible, about the church. Then, we drew some of those questions out of a hat and talked about them in small groups. One of the questions was about what we mean by faith. And one of the confirmands gave an absolutely perfect answer. Faith, he said, is trust. I'm sure I could hear St. Paul and Jesus cheering in the background on that one. That's exactly what Jesus and Paul and all the other great souls down through the ages have learned. Faith isn't about believing "six impossible things before breakfast," nor about the doctrines summarized in a creed. Faith is trust. It's that simple. God, for us, is whatever we trust ourselves to. The word faith literally means "to cause to become a foundation." Whatever we build our lives on is our god. And if we make success or wealth or national security the foundation for our lives, then sooner or later, those idols will let us down.

If the voices we hear in our scriptures speak any truth at all, it is that the true God, the living God, the God in whom we are called to place our ultimate trust is a God who always remains faithful to us, even when we are not faithful to God. God, and only God, is trustworthy as the foundation under our lives. This doesn't mean that we won't experience the

bruises and bumps that will come our way as the result of our own or others' flawed choices. It does mean that nothing that befalls us can bring us ultimate harm. It does mean that the worst that human beings can do to one another and to our world cannot and will not ultimately destroy God's creation. God is faithful.

Moreover, God does not remain insulated from our pains and unmoved by our troubles. Rather, God identifies with us, even suffers with us in our suffering. At the heart of our faith is a man dying on a cross for sins others committed, and that man on that cross bears witness to a God who is moving the universe in a particular direction—the direction of self-giving love, the direction of radical forgiveness, the direction of vulnerable risk-taking for the sake of others. Or as theologian John Howard Yoder put it once, “People who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe.” That is not the message we hear from the priests of Wall Street or the corporate boardrooms and investment houses or the corridors of Congress or the White House.

Are we willing to speak the language of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of redemptive sacrifice to a world where the false gods of wealth, of power, of national self-interest compete for our loyalty. The test of our faithfulness is not how successful we are, how much wealth we accumulate, how powerful we become, either as individuals or as a nation. The test of our faithfulness to the God who has spoken to us in the language of vulnerability and shared humanity is the extent to which we are willing to put ourselves on the line for the sake of others, particularly those who are also vulnerable and weak and poor. Are we willing to commit ourselves and our wealth to becoming the “balm in Gilead” that can heal the world's ills, and in the process heal our own?