

“To The 7th Generation”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCCat The Villages, FL
June 16th, 2013,
4th Sun. after Pentecost
Fathers’ Day

1 Kings 21:1-20a

Luke 7:36-8:2

[Jesus said,]

"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.

When they could not pay, he forgave them both.

Now which of them will love him more?"

Luke 7:42-43

Let us pray... O God,

May you give us a vision for seven generations ahead.

Guide us to make our plans with them in mind as a church, as a society,
as a household.

Amen

Debt – it is easy to get into and tough to get out of.

It can hang over someone like dark clouds threatening thunder and lightning,
except you know it is going to strike someday, ready or not.

When that burden is lifted, you can breathe easier.

You can dance. You can start thinking ahead.

There is a Native American proverb that says, “Plan for the 7th Genration”.

As a church, we know something about that with a loan for \$1 1/2 million

to pay for our beautiful church building – now spread over a 30 year period
with reasonable, achievable monthly payments.

We are blessed to have such an arrangement –

and it helps that the loaning financial institution
is the Pension Board of the United Church of Christ.

They want us to succeed – not only in making our payments,
but to be a continuing presence in our part of Central Florida
to proclaim the Gospel. Forgive us our debts!

Not all financial institutions are as committed to their debtors’ success,
as we’ve seen or perhaps experienced,
over the past 5 years of economic recession.

The first signs of this in Florida

was in 2007 when property insurance rates went through the roof –
including the state sponsored Citizens property insurance corporation.

In 2004 hurricanes crisscrossed Florida leaving Pasco County relatively untouched,
but soon after, insurance companies raised sinkhole coverage in that area
or dropped homeowners coverage altogether.

People were not able to maintain their homes and on almost every street,
you could see ‘For Sale’ signs.

Willard, p.2

Recent scholarship about archaeological discoveries in northern Israel shed some light onto the political and economic situation of Jesus' day. The Jesus Seminar scholars, in particular, have emphasized the significance of the discovery of Sepphoris – a thriving Roman trade center that was not even mentioned in the New Testament.

What we know is that the Romans taxed the local community to maintain the city of Sepphoris, pushing smaller homeowners and farmers off their property and absorbing their land into larger estates, run by absentee landlords and administered by stewards.

We can see this happening in our own time as smaller farms are bought up by large agricultural corporations or sold off to entrepreneurs for development. The dynamics and mechanisms of Jesus' time are still at work in our own.

The Roman Empire was clearly about domination – an imperial model that has been repeated throughout history, Long before the Romans, the Assyrians, Egyptians, and other cultures organized their societies in such a way as to prey upon conquered people and captured resources to support a privileged few.

Some would say the United States is heir to the imperial model of ancient Rome, or perhaps that comparison applies to those shadowy interest groups that work to influence our government to favor drug companies, oil, guns, media, healthcare – as well as big agriculture. It is not clear what can be done about this except to be aware that it goes on, to change things when possible, and to set a good example until they do.

In our lesson today from 1st Kings, the voracious greed of empire building can be plainly seen as the Israelite king, Ahab, desires the vineyard of his subject, Naboth, which is next to his palace. Naboth refuses to sell his land, because of his family's commitment to be stewards of the land God had given to their ancestors.

King Ahab was frustrated by this, prompting his wife Jezebel to act behind the scenes. So, she coordinated a ruse to denounce Naboth, have him executed, and seize his lands – to trespass against him!

Our reading today, only goes as far as to acknowledge that God is aware of this injustice and sends the prophet Elijah to confront King Ahab – who will be treated in the way he treated Naboth.

There are debts to be paid, too, by those imperial powers which rely upon predatory financial practices and violent enforcement for short term gain without considering future generations. This violates that Native American proverb to anticipate the needs of up to 7 generations into the future. Forgive us our debts!

Willard, p.3

There are modern day prophets who still confront the powers of the world because they see the same predicament in the 21st Century CE described by the contemporary Christian scholars of the Jesus Seminar as happening in the 1st Century CE.

Though not a Christian theologian, David Korten is certainly a prophetic voice who is 'crying in the wilderness' about impending doom, but who also offers a word of hope that things can be done.

Korten – like the Jesus Seminar, points out the dangers of empire-building while offering the principles of a traditional 'village' as a practical model for true community – for how people ought to live.

He describes this transformation as 'the Great Turning' – not to 'fix' the Empire, but 'to birth a new era'.

An example of this kind of change is the planting of community gardens as a 'food forest' available for anyone to eat like the Beacon Hill Food Forest in Seattle, WA which – at 7 1/2 acres, is *the largest edible forest on public land in the nation.*

<http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/how-cooperatives-are-driving-the-new-economy/7-ways-to-own-the-new-economy2014together>

Another modern, secular prophet who helped save many, many lives in times of natural disaster and war, was Fred Cuny.

He did not simply coordinate emergency relief, but took into account the cultural and political situation.

He effectively combined humanitarian needs with respect for the people being helped.

He especially understood the role of the military as a support for political goals and not the other way around, when it came to providing help in war zones.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cuny/bio/hero.html>

Martin Luther King is another example we have come to recognize as a prophet in our time.

On the occasion of his death, he was in Memphis, TN to support the sanitation workers' strike there.

Up to then, he had been directing the preparation of the 'Poor Peoples Campaign' which would take King's message beyond the exclusive advocacy of the African-American cause towards an inclusive effort to help all of America's poor people.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poor_People's_Campaign#Memphis_sanitation_strike

The Jesus Seminar emphasizes that Roman policies to maintain the city of Sepphoris brought heavy debt to local landowners.

As a result, the social fabric of the local, traditional society was being torn apart.

Willard, p.4

Many of these marginalized people tried to maintain themselves through a career change by becoming potters.

Evidence for this was suggested by the discoveries of large amounts of very bad pottery dating to this period.

Otherwise, many more were kicked to the curb to become homeless beggars or bandits. Forgive us our debts!

Into this situation, Jesus sent out his disciples two by two with no extra coat, no money bag, just a walking stick and what they had on. They were sent to those who were still homeowners where they would share their skills to heal, to cast out demons, and to teach about the Good News that the Kingdom of God was coming. Forgive us our debts and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive.

In our Gospel story today, Jesus was invited into the house of a Pharisee where we see firsthand, the dynamics of what Jesus' apostles would accomplish after him, to spread the Gospel throughout the Middle East and beyond.

Jesus is received into the home of Simon – who in other versions of this story is called Simon the Leper.

Considering the fear that people had of leprosy in Jesus' day, Simon must now be healed, because he was entertaining guests with a meal in his own home – and most likely to say “thank you” to Jesus for that healing.

As a Pharisee and a householder, he must have had some standing in his community and very likely was a person of privilege.

When an un-named woman enters Simon's house, she anoints Jesus' feet in an act of gratitude, though regardless of propriety and scandalizing everyone in the room!

Simon says to himself, that if this man really were a prophet, he would certainly know this woman had a reputation.

So, we also assume this woman is one of those ‘bad girls of the Bible’ – though not necessarily a prostitute, for in a traditional society, a woman could have a bad reputation just for speaking her mind and daring to challenge the patriarchal society of the time.

Jesus intervenes for her sake, shifting everyone's attention by telling a parable, in which he makes the point that a person who has been forgiven a large debt would be more grateful than someone forgiven of a small debt. Forgive us our debts!

Willard, p.5

The implication is that Simon – who was healed of his leprosy,
should be less inclined to judge someone else, if for no other reason
than gratitude for being released from the terrible stigma
of having a disease.

Jesus then stuns everyone there by pronouncing this woman forgiven.
“Her sins, even though they were many,
have been taken away because of her great love.”

As in other Gospel stories and teachings, Jesus blends the concepts
of healing and forgiveness – and now love.

This is one of the great messages of what
God’s Kingdom of Heaven is about.

Therefore with this story,
we have an example of how those early apostles challenged
the predatory, indifferent ‘powers that be’ of the Empire
and helped heal the rift between homeowner and homeless –
all who were victimized by being indebted.

It was through the table fellowship and healing message and actions
of Jesus and the apostles who would follow him, that things began to change.

What can we do to be more aware of our own complicity
in those structures of domination?

How might we be more open to heal the torn fabric of our society?

How can we be more receptive of the Good News of
healing, forgiveness, and love
and gratefully share what we have received?

As it says in The Lord’s Prayer – the ‘Our Father’,

“forgive us our debts, forgive us our trespasses as we have been forgiven...”

and may we not trespass against others
as empires so often have trespassed against
marginalized people throughout history.

But may we help to bring healing and forgiveness and love instead,
to a world deep in debt for not doing the same.

You may not be able to change the world,
but you may just be able to help your part of it –
even up to the 7th generation.

Amen

Our first scripture lesson from I Kings 21:1-20 ^a tells about the treachery of Ahab, the corrupt king of Israel, who was incited by his wife, Jezebel the Canaanite, and how God sends Elijah to confront them...

^{21:1} Naboth owned a vineyard in Jezreel near King Ahab's palace.

² One day, Ahab said,

"Naboth, your vineyard is near my palace.

Give it to me so I can turn it into a vegetable garden.

I'll give you a better vineyard or pay whatever you want for yours."

³ Naboth answered,

"This vineyard has always been in my family. I won't let you have it."

⁴ So Ahab went home, angry and depressed

because of what Naboth had told him.

He lay on his bed,

just staring at the wall and refusing to eat a thing.

⁵ Jezebel his wife came in and asked,

"What's wrong? Why won't you eat?"

⁶ "I asked Naboth to sell me his vineyard or to let me give him a better one,"

Ahab replied. "And he told me I couldn't have it."

⁷ "Aren't you the king of Israel?" Jezebel asked.

"Get out of bed and eat something!

Don't worry, I'll get Naboth's vineyard for you."

⁸⁻¹⁰ Jezebel wrote a letter to each of the leaders of the town

where Naboth lived. In the letters she said:

Call everyone together and tell them to go without eating today.

When they come together, give Naboth a seat at the front.

Have two liars sit across from him and swear

that Naboth has cursed God and the king.

Then take Naboth outside and stone him to death!

She signed Ahab's name to the letters and sealed them with his seal.

Then she sent them to the town leaders.

¹¹ After receiving her letters, they did exactly what she had asked.

¹² They told the people that it was a day to go without eating,

and when they all came together,

they seated Naboth at the front.

¹³ The two liars came in and sat across from Naboth.

Then they accused him of cursing God and the king,

so the people dragged Naboth outside and stoned him to death.

¹⁴ The leaders of Jezreel sent a message back to Jezebel that said,

"Naboth is dead."

¹⁵ As soon as Jezebel got their message, she told Ahab,

"Now you can have the vineyard Naboth refused to sell.

He's dead."¹⁶ Ahab got up and went to take over the vineyard.

¹⁷ The LORD said to Elijah the prophet,

¹⁸ "King Ahab of Israel is in Naboth's vineyard right now,

taking it over.

¹⁹ Go tell him that I say,

'Ahab, you murdered Naboth and took his property.

And so, in the very spot where dogs licked up Naboth's blood,

they will lick up your blood.'"

When Elijah found him, ²⁰ Ahab said,

"So, my enemy, you found me at last."

Luke 7:36-8:3

- [36] One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him,
and he went into the Pharisee's house, and took his place at table.
- [37] And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner,
when she learned that he was at table in the Pharisee's house,
brought an alabaster flask of ointment,
[38] and standing behind him at his feet, weeping,
she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head,
and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.
- [39] Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself,
"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is
who is touching him, for she is a sinner."
- [40] And Jesus answering said to him,
"Simon, I have something to say to you."
And he answered,
"What is it, Teacher?"
- [41] "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.
[42] When they could not pay, he forgave them both.
Now which of them will love him more?"
- [43] Simon answered,
"The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more."
And he said to him,
"You have judged rightly."
- [44] Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon,
"Do you see this woman?
I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet,
but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.
[45] You gave me no kiss,
but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet.
[46] You did not anoint my head with oil,
but she has anointed my feet with ointment.
[47] Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many,
are forgiven, for she loved much;
but he who is forgiven little, loves little."
- [48] And he said to her,
"Your sins are forgiven."
- [49] Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves,
"Who is this, who even forgives sins?"
- [50] And he said to the woman,
"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."
- 8:[1] Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages,
preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.
And the twelve were with him,
[2] and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities:
Mary, called Mag'dalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,
[3] and Joan'na, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna,
and many others, who provided for them out of their means.