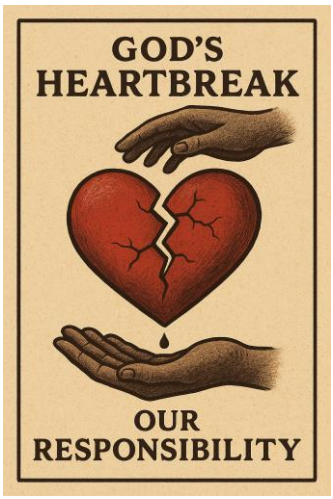

God's Heartbreak, Our Responsibility

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 20C || September 21, 2025 || 9:30am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

On this beautiful day, as we conclude what has been for many, an enormous and challenging week, and as we prepare for the week ahead, I would have appreciated easier scripture passages — a soothing balm for what ails us. Instead, we are met with wailing and bemoaning, another letter from Paul to Timothy that feels less soaring than last week's portion — pray for those in leadership, "[y]es, we know!" we might be forgiven for declaring.

Then we have a psalm that rails against "the nations," and finally Luke's gospel with one of the most peculiar parables Jesus ever told — the parable of the dishonest manager. Deep breath.

One of the many gifts of scripture is its ability to unfold and reveal, and when we are lucky, it can even inspire us. And so, upon closer reading and reflection — and this week truly required multiple passes through the text — these scriptures open into something vital for us.

Jeremiah's lament about the state of his society, about the brokenness, pain, and grief of his people, could easily be describing our modern moment. In this time of corrosive language, social division, and our fractured Christian family, we hear Jeremiah's words anew:

> "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 has the health of my poor people not been restored?"

This is not abstract theology. This is raw, unfiltered grief. Jeremiah looks at his world, at the pain of his people, and he weeps. He aches. And in doing so, he shows us something profound: when we are broken, bewildered, and battered by the times, God's heart is broken as well. God does not stand apart. God is with us in the dismay and the hurt.

This week, several visitors to church described exactly that — the dismay, the grief, the heaviness they are feeling in the face of the world's divisions. Jeremiah gives us permission to speak that aloud, to know that God shares in that sorrow.

But God's heartbreak is not meant to leave us paralyzed. God's heartbreak becomes our invitation.

All summer long we considered the many facets of God's love — love that liberates, love that endures, love that advocates, love that cannot be bought or earned. Again and again, we saw that God's love requires choices. It is not abstract. It asks us to live differently, to align ourselves with God's purposes, to make decisions about whom we will serve.

And today's readings, unsettling as they are, call us back to that truth with startling clarity: we must choose our allegiance.

Luke's gospel doesn't make it easy. The parable of the dishonest manager leaves us scratching our heads, wondering - why would Jesus tell a story in which a dishonest money manager seems to be commended?

Scholars wrestle with this parable, and maybe that's the point. It resists a neat moral. But we are invited to notice the turn Jesus makes: he says "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."

And then the clincher: "You cannot serve God and wealth", admittedly a GREAT stewardship sermon theme, but this morning, I'll leave you to preach that to yourselves as we consider the resonance of Jesus' declaration.

"You cannot serve God and wealth" is like a clanging bell! Allegiance matters. We cannot hedge our bets, serve two masters, divide our loyalty. One way or another, our lives reveal who the boss of us really is.

Money or power; comfort or fear — they clamor to be our master. But Jesus insists: only God is worthy of that place in our lives.

Paul's letter to Timothy tells us what that looks like in daily practice. He says, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions."

Prayer, Paul says, is not small or perfunctory. It is one of the ways we declare our allegiance. When we pray for leaders, for neighbors, for strangers, for all people, we are aligning our hearts with God's will — the God who desires everyone to be their loved and full selves, the God who gave Christ as our living example of what that looks like. When we pray for people, even people who are challenging to consider our neighbors, we are asserting that God is the boss of us, and in prayer we are offering our hearts and time to God's desires for the world.

Prayer is both resistance and responsibility. It refuses to cede ultimate power to anyone but God. It shapes us to see others through God's compassionate gaze.

So how might these three impactful scripture readings connect through the ages to whisper in our ears, or slap us on the back?

Jeremiah gives us a God who mourns with us. Paul calls us to a life of prayer that steadies us in a fractured world. And Jesus demands that we choose our allegiance — God or wealth, God or fear, God or idols.

Our responsibility, then, is not to fix everything. It is not to carry every burden. But it is to be faithful — in little and in much. To use the gifts with which we've been entrusted not for selfish gain, but for the sake of others. To live so that our allegiance is unmistakably with God.

That is what it means to be good stewards: not that we do everything, but that we share what we have — our time, our resources, our compassion, our presence — generously and faithfully.

This week, we saw an extraordinary witness to what that can look like. Yesterday, hundreds of people gathered here, standing room only, to celebrate the life of Pam O'Reilly Fahey.

The sheer turnout was a testimony to how she lived — faithful in little and in much, generous with her gifts, steadfast in friendship, devoted in love. People came from all corners of her life to honor her, because she had given herself to others in countless ways. She was a steward of her life in the truest sense — not perfect, but faithful, generous, and loving.

Pam's life, and the gathering we shared in her honor, was itself a balm. A reminder that in a broken world, lives given faithfully and generously can bind up wounds and gladden hearts.

So yes, Jeremiah's lament is real. Our world feels fractured. Our civic life is corroding. Our hearts are heavy. But the balm is also real. God's love is still healing. And we are called to be part of it.

God's heartbreak is not the end of the story. God's heartbreak is the beginning of our responsibility.

The question Jesus presses upon us with his peculiar parable remains: Who is the boss of us? Whom do we serve?

May we answer with our lives. May we be faithful in little and in much. May we share our gifts generously. And may we, by God's grace, become part of the balm that heals God's people. Amen+