

Sermon for 11 September 2022@ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalter: Psalm 14 (UMH 746); 1

Timothy 1:12-17;

Luke 15:1-10

“Gilding the lily”

I came in my back door Friday night to find red lights flashing through my living room windows.

When I went outside I found a Baltimore City Emergency Firetruck, and when I went up to its open window and asked what was happening, I was told that was confidential information, not for public knowledge. I went back on my front steps and thought about it for a minute, and then turned back to the ambulance’s window and said, “Look, I’m not asking who it is, but I’m a pastor, and a police chaplain, and I’ve lived on this block for over fifty years. Could you just tell whoever’s in there my name and say I’m ready to help in any way I can if they need me?” Same answer, this time with more force and impatience.

Something’s wrong here. All over town ... all over humankind, if I read and hear the news right, there’s great reluctance to share common information for the common good.

We’ve been saying people don’t care for each other because they don’t go to church any more ... but I don’t think we can perch on that excuse any longer. After all, at the same time our Sunday schools were full, as Martin Luther King, Jr., said from the Birmingham jail, the most segregated hour of the week was 11 o’clock Sunday morning, and a lot of other things were wrong that we’re just now admitting to each other.

From the beginning, every human step forward has carried with it the potential, and often the actuality, for making things worse for some of us all the time. Lonesomeness and hopelessness, and meanness, are part of every child of God’s experience ... and that’s church business AND atheist business and everybody else’s business every day and all day. Period.

If I don’t see, and feel in my bones, that your welfare and my welfare are tied together, we literally don’t see. Just like the blind man in more than one of those stories about Jesus.

That’s point one in today’s scriptures. Jeremiah will not let go of his ugly insight, his negative bad-mouthing about people’s behavior, including the king’s and all those in power. Every now and then there are some bright spots, when he says, “If only you’d....” but not much. Doom is ahead, and misery is just outside the general population’s door. Psalm 14 follows

through in religious terms: “The fool sayeth in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” Timothy, modest model of the other way to act, and share, and fill the cup of kindness most of us have seen somewhere, opens the door slightly to the hint of another side of things; and Luke comes on full force with this Jesus talk of lost sheep and lost coins, and good shepherds and grateful sheep.

How did we get here? Oh yes. We were saying, “If only people would bend a little in the direction of consideration, not be so stuck on rules and self-protection...”

Let’s be serious, though. Do you think many shepherds leave ninety-nine sheep and risk everything for one lost lamb? And how many householders do you know who sweep the whole house until one lost coin shows up, and then invite the whole neighborhood for a party?

Isn’t this overkill, this way of expressing how the man behind the screen really runs things?

Is life set up that way, as you experience it?

Well, yes.

Even though I may have misspelled the word for today’s meaning, gilding the lily, making it pretty so we’ll buy it, is the real point. People won’t believe good news unless they’re pushed. Everybody’s too frantic, or depressed, or scared, or just plain on the internet these days to buy into the good news. Look at us. We’re worried nobody’s in church. No kids are meeting their friends in church, or learning Bible stories and songs like we did. What’s the world coming to?

Something new, that’s what. Next Friday begins Mercury in retrograde, and you know what that means. Don’t sign anything until after October 1 when that streak of trauma and confusion passes. And that’s just the old stuff. Read the news. Test the supply chain ... things are out of joint like none of us old folks have ever seen. Believing the Lord’s Prayer, and acting out the Golden Rule moment by moment, is HARD WORK.

But the secret is: It works. Like nothing else. Reality is set up to be trusted. Good things come to those who turn their faces in that direction.

I’m not kidding. “Be not dismayed whate’er betide...” I can still sing it after all these years.. and I didn’t even learn it in kindergarten. Ours was an uptown church. I learned that in my first little churches in seminary, little country churches with congregations not much different than Bethesda right now. “God will take care of you ... “ I can’t go beyond that. Neither can you. We are here, praise God, because day in and night out, time after time and trial after trial, the Holy Spirit of God through Jesus Christ,

welcomes every attempt at deep down humanity and generosity, and every fresh effort to forgive you and me both, is rewarded, and has been, and we're betting, ever shall be.

So talk it up. Don't be ashamed of your faith. Let it spring forth. "A soft voice turneth away wrath." "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'" "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name Thy kingdom come ...thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen."

Gilding the lily. Tell the truth, and make it beautiful, through Jesus Christ. Amen.