

Sermon for 18 September 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9 (*Insert:Alternate leader and people*); 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13
“Lots”

This ancient custom of having the pastor give a sermon has no more authority than any other part of the liturgy. The church has done its human best to offer you a sound interpretation of scripture, tradition, and the Holy Spirit; but on Sunday evening, when I sit down to prepare next week's bulletin, the sermon title I choose is as body-bound as any other word spoken between lovers.

The Gospel for today is so full of sayings that I could only come up with “Lots,” as in “Lots of things.”

I want us to face that squarely. I'm asking us to remember that Scripture can lead us in many directions, and that God has all sorts of ways of getting to us. We Christians stand on our faith in Jesus as the only Son of God ... but we know Jesus was a Jew, and as the saying goes, “Two Jews, three opinions.”

I'm walking around something I've been believing more and more every day I studied to preach this week. I don't have to be right. Only generous; or, not even that: just open to improvement. In Jesus' parable, the guy who got caught saw an escape route and took it. A way not to be crooked, or in jail. Let's say he could call the money he stole from his master, his commission. We know such things happen all the time ... and the fact Jesus knew that, and turned that into a memory-verse for all of us, is just another sign of how creative the Lord is about saving us. I watch my son doing stand-up comedy, and see him doing the same thing: turning one thing into another, using one person's motivation into another person's message, and painting the whole thing in roses because that's where the world is finally going to end up, run by the God we know enough to trust that's the direction things are headed.

Lots of things. Matthew Fox says people have to have myths ... not in the sense of untruths, but in things like the British monarchy. Fox says he's been disappointed at how sarcastic some Americans have been about Queen Elizabeth II's 70-year reign. There's plenty to criticize about the British Empire, but that's the Brits' business to deal with. We can see she was a good person, handled lots of things well, with a sense of humor and duty that brought lots of matters to good results...and over here, we could for good reason admire and even yearn for that, ourselves.

As far as lots of meanings, this mix of parables and statements Luke gives us today could be helping us face up to our need to work at turning loose some

of our dreamy descriptions of America as the land of the free and the home of the brave. Long before we went to war with each other in what Ken will tell you is one of the worst civil wars in history, we were building imagery to cover up Italian exclusion and Irish abuse, Chinese isolation and anti-Catholic separation. We need, in other words, a fresh dream, a better myth, about this being a place where justice and equality grew out of hard-fought nastiness again and again.

That's somewhere in the Bible, whether in Abraham or St. Paul ... and how we use Scripture is key to how real God's dream of one world is to us. In fact, talking about the parts of the liturgy, a good dance could come back into our worship and ingrain into us something about sharing energy and helping one another walk alongside each of us to good music and good words. Sermons are by no means all the helps we apply Sabbath by Sabbath. What could be better than helping Addison weave in and out among us to a good tune, and playing a triangle to the chorus of 'you and me, sister,' and 'yes, Lord, sing it again to me?'"

Lots to learn. If we're willing to come back again and again. If we're able to think of Jesus talking our language. If we're able, because that's what God asks for, to dream better things, better treatment, more listening, and more working prayer with the Spirit that comes and stays among us, in Jesus' name, and for each neighbor's sake. Amen, and amen. Lots of it.