Sermon for Sept 22

[Jeremiah 8:18-](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=280#hebrew_reading)9:1

[Psalm 79:1-9](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=280#psalm_reading)

[1 Timothy 2:1-7](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=280#epistle_reading)

[Luke 16:1-13](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=280#gospel_reading)

THE BALM OF GILEAD

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Gilead was an agricultural region east of the Jordan River, and in ancient times it was known for its production of spices and herbs. One of those herbs was apparently esteemed for its soothing and perhaps healing properties when you mixed it into a salve and applied it as an ointment. Sort of an early version of Gold Bond.

It was so highly esteemed, in fact, that it was carried by caravans down to Egypt for the rich folks who lived there. Back in the book of Genesis, we read about one of those caravans.

Remember when Joseph's brothers were so jealous of the fact that their father liked Joseph best that they stripped him of his coat of many-colors and threw him in a pit to die? But before that could happened, a caravan came along headed to Egypt, so they decided to sell him into slavery instead? Let me read the verse that describes that moment.

*And they sat down to eat a meal. Then they lifted their eyes and looked, and there was a company of Ishmaelites, coming from Gilead with their camels, bearing spices, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry them down to Egypt.* (Gen. 37: 25)

In the OT passage we read this morning, Jeremiah uses the phrase balm of Gilead as a poetic image. Jeremiah was a prophet who lived and worked in Jerusalem during the decades leading up to the catastrophe when Babylon conquered Jerusalem, leveled the city and carried its leading citizens into captivity. In the passage we read, Jeremiah is contemplating this devastation and wondering, Where is the balm of Gilead for my people, for my nation? Where is the relief, where is the balm to soothe our pain and heal our wounds?

8:20 "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

8:21 For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

8:22 Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?

9:1 O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!

From a Christian pulpit, there is a strong temptation to take this beautiful image of a soothing, healing ointment, and interpret in terms so the person of Our Lord. In fact, just for the interest of it, I went on one of the websites that contain collections of sermons. For those of you who didn't know, there are several websites where you can go, type in a Bible verse, and what pops up will be complete sermons that various ministers have submitted to the website that focus on that verse. (In case you also didn't know it, ministers like to see their own words in print!)

And sure enough, when I entered Jeremiah 8: 22, the Balm of Gilead verse, up popped a list of sermons that ran to the bottom of the page and beyond. I obviously didn't read them all, although I did skim a couple, and the titles of almost all the others made their message clear. Sure enough, virtually every single one of those messages was about how Jesus, the great physician, was the true Balm of Gilead.

The unanimity of all those sermon-writers obviously points to a profound truth, that Jesus Christ is our great physician, that we turn to him in times of spiritual difficulty and physical distress and seek relief and healing. Jesus invites us to so, and invariably responds, even if sometimes we cannot understand or recognize his response. That is a great Christian grace.

But having said that, with all reverence and respect, I'd like to suggest today that focusing exclusively or excessively on that particular grace runs the very real and important risk of sentimentalizing Christ, and thereby remaining comfortably forgetful of the others elements of his grace.

The selection from Luke that we read this morning is usually referred to as the parable of the untrustworthy manager. It consists of a story Jesus told about a servant who was in charge of his lord's finances and got caught cheating. The servant figures he's going to be fired, so he quickly devises a plan to cheat his lord even more, to the benefit of some of those who owe his lord quantities of goods, figuring that after he's fired, these folks will be grateful to him and help him out. Somewhat surprisingly, the lord seems to applaud the servant for being so deviously clever. And then there follow several morals of the story having to do with the sons of the world being shrewder than the sons of the light, with proving yourself capable of large responsibility by being responsible in small things, about not being able to serve two masters, and about the opposition between God and money.

Many people are confused when reading this selection, because the morals that are drawn from the story seem to have very little to do with each other and with the story itself, and enormous amounts of pulpit ingenuity has been exercised in drawing one sort of connection or another.

A much simpler explanation, and in my view, the correct one, is that Luke simply took several unrelated sayings of Jesus and attached them to the end of the recorded parable. We won't go into the weeds of that explanation here except to say that this was a common practice of the early Christian writers, who even at this stage were attempting to interpret Jesus as much as simply record what Jesus said and did.

But if we grant that, at least for the moment, then we see the original parable, the story Jesus would have told his audience, as ending with the somewhat shocking line: *The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness.*

In our translation the word used is 'master', but in fact it's the same word Luke always uses for Lord when he means Jesus. So the original account almost certainly read:

*The Lord*, that is, Jesus, *commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness.*

End of parable.

You see how shocking that might have been to the audience listening to Jesus? There's no piety there, so softness, no drawing some comfortable moral about how much better it is to serve God than money, or showing how you can prove yourself worthy for big responsibilities. He concludes by simply holding up a thief and a liar as a model for his audience to emulate.

Suppose Billy Graham had got up and in the middle of his sermon told how certain rich and prominent young politician got drunk one night and drove off a bridge, then left a young woman to drown in the car while he ran home, called his political consultants, and spent several hours figuring out how to deal with the political fall- out. But then suppose Billy Graham had concluded by saying: And I want you all to be like that politician.

If you can imagine that, then you can you imagine how shocking this parable of the untrustworthy manager would have sounded to the pious Jewish people listening to Christ's sermons.

Many times throughout the Gospels, we're told how people, on hearing Jesus preach, became outraged, sometimes to the point of physically threatening Him, sometimes to the point where he had to escape from them for his own safety. We're told that towards the end most of his followers deserted him, denied him and even betrayed him. Does that sound like someone who offered nothing but simple moral platitudes and pious religious sentiments?

No, it's because Christ's message was also a message about storm clouds gathering, about burglars about to break into the house, about families being torn apart, about crumbling walls and dying harvests and foolish young women being found unprepared and having locked doors shut in their faces. It was about the immanence of calamity and the absolute necessity and urgency of acting now, today, to prepare for that calamity.

Balms by their very nature do not address the nature and source of a person's problems. I once had a conversation with a heroin addict, who very effectively described to me how nothing in her life gave her anywhere near the satisfaction that the drug did. And she made a very convincing case, from a purely rational point of view. Her life before she became addicted was in fact so shallow, so unrewarding, so cheerless and full of pain and disappointment that, in a horrible way, her devotion to heroine made rational sense. Heroin was her Balm of Gilead. That's why addiction can be so psychologically compelling: from the addict's point of view, it's often preferable to the alternative.

Christians and non-Christians alike suffer from the pains of disease and catastrophe and loss. Christians have the grace of knowing that the pains of this life are somehow incorporated into God's divine love for this world, and the consolation of knowing that lost loved ones live on in another realm of being. But that doesn't mean that suffering and heartache are any less for the Christian than the non-Christian.

The spirit of Christ is indeed our ever present comfort, but it lives in us, not to eliminate our suffering, but to share it. Jesus healed the sick during his ministry, but he was at pains to emphasize that his miracles were performed as signs, as evidence that he was who he claimed to be, in order that we might believe what he had to tell us.

“The poor you will always have with you,” he once said, in another of his shocking statements. And by 'the poor', he wasn't singling out the single problem of lacking money. He was saying disease, violence, accident, death, disappointment...these things you will always have with you. He didn't come to provide a balm for those things; he came to teach us how to live our lives in light of their reality, in light of their inevitability.

The untrustworthy manager was doing exactly that, accepting the reality of his situation and dealing effectively with that reality while there was still time.

In the 12th chapter of John's gospel, John records Jesus saying the following:

Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”

Each one of us has been given a certain period of light: it's called our life. Each of us has a present age and an age to come: our present age is our life. Each of us is alive for only one day, and that day is today. Today is the day of our salvation. Jesus is calling us to come with him today. He is first and foremost, not our balm of Gilead, but first and foremost our guide and strength on the endless journey towards God, the journey that must begin today.

And so our sermon prayer for this morning, Gracious God, is that you grant us the practical wisdom of the untrustworthy manager, the common sense to act in our own enlightened self-interest, the intelligence to be as calculating and effective in dealing with the reality of the urgency of our spiritual situation as he was in dealing with his worldly situation. Let us be innocent as sheep, but also shrewd as serpents in following Christ, because that was his own command to us, and we pray in his name.