

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 20, Year C

First Reading

Jeremiah 8:18–9:1 (track one)

My joy is gone; grief is upon me;  
    my heart is sick within me.  
Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people  
    from the length and breadth of the land:  
“Is the LORD not in Zion?  
    Is her King not in her?”  
“Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images  
    and with their foreign idols?”  
“The harvest is past, the summer is ended,  
    and we are not saved.”  
For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded;  
    I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me.

Is there no balm in Gilead?  
    Is there no physician there?  
Why then has the health of the daughter of my people  
    not been restored?

Oh that my head were waters,  
    and my eyes a fountain of tears,  
that I might weep day and night  
    for the slain of the daughter of my people! (ESV)

Amos 8:4–7 (track two)

Hear this, you who trample on the needy  
    and bring the poor of the land to an end,  
saying, “When will the new moon be over,  
    that we may sell grain?  
And the Sabbath,  
    that we may offer wheat for sale,  
that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great  
    and deal deceitfully with false balances,  
that we may buy the poor for silver  
    and the needy for a pair of sandals

and sell the chaff of the wheat?”

The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:  
“Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. (ESV)

## Second Reading

1 Timothy 2:1–7

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

Luke 16:1–13

He also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.”

“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. One who is faithful in a

very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Lesson

#### Jeremiah text (track one)

Over the last few weeks I've tried to give you my sense of what it means to speak as a prophet, the way that the identity of the prophet becomes subsumed in the identity of the One for whom they speak. The prophet, in this case Jeremiah, speaks in the first person, not exactly on behalf of God, but in a strange and wonderful solidarity with God. In my English Standard Version of the Bible from which I've quoted today's passage these verses are preceded by the title "Jeremiah Grieves for His People." That isn't it at all, but by now you know what I mean. (If you haven't been keeping up with my other comments on Jeremiah, here are links to [Proper 18](#) and [Proper 19](#).)

This week I'd like to focus on a different theme that pops up twice in the reading. In the first instance the Lord cries (through Jeremiah):

"Is the LORD not in Zion?  
Is her King not in her?"  
"Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images  
and with their foreign idols?"

Then, just a few verses later we get another similar question:

Is there no balm in Gilead?  
Is there no physician there?  
Why then has the health of the daughter of my people  
not been restored?

The implied answer to both those initial questions is "Yes, yes there is!" It might be a little harder to see that in the first question and response, but in the second it is clear. The only reason to ask that second question is because there is a balm in Gilead, there is

a physician there. Once we understand the nature of this question and response pattern, the first set makes a different sense. The question “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?” is rhetorical as well. It is as if the prophet stood on the street, *pointing at the Lord* as he asked, “Is the Lord not here? Can you not see Him?”

The Lord stands in the midst of the street, keening in grief as the people suffer, asking “Can you not see me? I’m right here! Why do you turn to idols that cannot protect you or heal you?”

It would be tempting to read these two questions as though God were suggesting that They had withdrawn from Their people and that this was the reason that these ills had fallen upon them. It is certainly a theme that has permeated some misguided preaching from time to time. But this is not the God that Jeremiah knows, not One who withdraws but One who remains and suffers alongside us when we turn to false sources of safety and healing.

Amos text (track two)

At the end of the reading from Amos for this week we find the second of a pair of texts that refer to the buying and selling of the poor/righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes. Here is the earlier verse from chapter two.

Amos 2:6

Thus says the LORD:

“For three transgressions of Israel,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,  
because they sell the righteous for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of sandals.

Scholars who have tried to interpret the earlier passage (which must obviously control our reading of the latter} have struggled with it, trying to understand what it means to sell the needy for shoes. Earlier interpretations have tended to fall into one of two schools. Either Amos was objecting to judges who accepted a small bribe (a pair of shoes) in order to rule against a poor person and relegate them to debt slavery, or Amos was accepting the sale, but saying the tiny price (only a pair of shoes} was too small to justify being sold.

In both cases, Amos accepts the institution of debt slavery, but in an article I found this week we find a third and (to me) more satisfying interpretation that speaks clearly to our text for this week as well.

In a paper by Avi Shveka, he puts forth a parallel text from Hittite law that describes the rewards someone may claim if they capture and return a slave to their owner. The greater the distance from which they are returned, the greater the reward. So the greatest distances involve a reward of six shekels, reducing by two shekels until, at the nearest point of return, the reward is a pair of shoes. Shveka points out that this is a clear violation of the command in Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy 23:15

“You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you.”

As much as I wish I could summarize the article better, I just don't have room to do so in the space of one Divergence, so I'll link the paper at the end of this section. Instead, I'll jump to the conclusions, which are that 1) Amos objected to the entire institution of debt slavery and the selling of the “righteous” (those innocent of criminal offenses) into slavery, and 2) that our reading from this week is an amplification, pointing to the rich who “buy” such slaves.

I will admit that I was glad to find a reading of this text that actually suggested that Amos objected to debt slavery in principle. But I was also disappointed to realize that he appears to accept slavery for those who are guilty of criminal offenses. This is particularly upsetting in an era in which privately operated prisons “lease” labor to minimum wage establishments. This feels much too much like the kind of slavery Amos might have envisioned and accepted. The only mitigation I find here is that slavery as a consequence of theft is certainly preferable to the more violent alternatives in that time.

Oh, and [here's the link to that article](#).

## Second Reading

I would rather not get into a detailed discussion of my reasons for believing that 1 Timothy comes to us from the pen of someone other than Paul so I'll simply say here that this particular passage from 1 Timothy is a clear example of why this isn't Paul. Paul didn't actively resist political authority, but he did not expect it to allow him to live “a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” His life had never been like that nor did he expect it to be so for any follower of Jesus. This passage is an example showing us that we must read even the New Testament through the lens of Jesus. In it

we begin to see the church settling into its unfortunate role *within* empire and not standing over against it.

Does this mean that it has no value to us? Absolutely not. In the same way that other texts are there because God desires that we learn from them, even if we don't do as the people in them do, this is intended to be edifying. It teaches me, it teaches us that even the Gospel can be twisted into something God wouldn't recognize if we aren't careful. This passage is the earliest example I can think of about what happens when Christians cozy up to political power.

This isn't to say that we shouldn't pray for those in power! Of course we should, that they might be guided by the Spirit to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly. But we don't do that in order that *we* might live peaceably. We pray for those in power on behalf of those who do not know Jesus, who do not have the security that we know in Him.

Fortunately, we have 2 Timothy, against which we can measure this letter. (Paul wrote 2 Timothy, I'm convinced.) We get to start on 2 Timothy in a couple of weeks.

## Gospel Text

“And I say unto you, beware the biases of the translators of the Bible!”

Sorry, I couldn't resist a little drama there, but I just finished an exhausting (hopefully exhaustive) study of every case in which Jesus says “I say to you” in Luke. Why? Because our translators have made another error that seriously colors the interpretation of both halves of our Gospel text for today.

This time it's where they chose to break off one paragraph and start another. It's wrong. Really wrong, and it makes it seem as though Jesus is really speaking of one thing, when in reality He's speaking of two loosely related things.

What they did was this. They stuck this phrase, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings,” onto the end of the teaching about forgiving debts that aren't owed to you, rather than on the beginning of the teaching about making use of “dishonest wealth” or “dishonest mammon” (the semitic word for money). So maybe it's about dishonest money, and we should just say it that way.

Regardless, that phrase that begins with “And I tell you, make friends...” belongs with the paragraph below, not the paragraph above, and the translators really should have known better. But I figured if I was going to pick a bone with the translators about this, I’d better be right, so I went through every single (I think, there were 33) instance where Jesus spoke in the first person and said, “I say to you” to see if I was right, and I am. In most cases where Jesus says “I say to you,” He does it to kind of wrap up a teaching, so we can almost excuse the translators for being lazy here. Almost. But in the majority of those cases when Jesus does this He just says it, with no conjunction like “and” the way He does in this case. And in the cases where He *does* use a conjunction, He uses “*de*” or “*gar*”. (I’m transliterating the Greek because I don’t have access right now to Greek fonts.) This is the *only* instance in which Jesus introduces His own “I say to you” with “*kai*.” Now in Greek, *kai* and *de* can be used very similarly, but they’re not really the same. *De* can mean “and” but it often means “but.” It has an opposing sense to it. So when it’s used, it’s closely related to what came before. *Kai* can be something closely linked, but it *can also refer to a loosely related idea*. (I looked it up to be sure I had that right.)

*Gar* is a whole different order of conjunction. It means “for” or “therefore.” If Jesus had meant to sum up His parable on the dishonest manager with this sentence, “*gar*,” (therefore) would have made sense, better sense than “*de*” because there’s no adversative sense to it. *Kai* might have worked, but keep in mind that in every other case where Jesus’ use of “I say to you” occurs in Luke in relation to what came before, He either uses no conjunction or *de* or *gar*. Every one.

This is different. And as if this use of a new conjunction weren’t enough, Jesus suddenly starts talking about “dishonest mammon.” The sentence the translators stuck on the end of the wrong paragraph introduces the speech about mammon. Of course it belongs with what follows. Even if you didn’t read the conjunctions correctly you could figure that out.

But by putting this sentence at the end of the parable the translators tell us that this whole parable is about money.

And it is not. Absolutely not.

The parable is about giving away what isn’t yours to give so as to please the One to whom it really belongs.

And what is that we’re encouraged to give away? Forgiveness, reconciliation with the Father. It isn’t ours to give, but it is the Father’s desire that we be engaged in what Paul calls “the ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Cor. 5:18) We are, like the dishonest manager, given authority to change the books, to declare forgiveness of debt to the burdened. And

this pleases the “rich man” to whom it all belongs. It has nothing whatever to do with money. (Another lost stewardship theme. Sorry.)

Only then does Jesus say, “Also, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest money.” It’s almost an afterthought. A loosely related idea, as if He said, “Oh, and by the way...”

And here we do get a good stewardship theme, now that we’ve set it apart as it should be. It is loosely related because it isn’t about giving away what isn’t ours to give, except loosely. It’s about having entrusted to us the “true riches.” To make friends by means of dishonest mammon doesn’t mean to give it away. It just means to use it so as to make these “friends” who will welcome us into the eternal, well... tents. It says tents. But it can mean habitations.

And here’s the thing. Who did Jesus say would enter into the Kingdom of Heaven first, ahead of the “righteous,” the “religious?” The tax collectors, the sinners, the prostitutes. I daresay it is this “they” by whom we hope to to be welcomed.

I’d like to be clear here. I don’t think this has a thing to do with being *admitted* to the heavenly tents. That has nothing to do with how I use my money. But it may affect how those I ignored or didn’t ignore choose to welcome me when I get there.

But even that’s not the point. The point is that God has riches to entrust to me that are far greater than anything I can produce for myself, and God is waiting for me to loosen my death grip on my possessions so that They can slip something better into my hands. But if I can’t be faithful with what I’ve produced for myself (dishonest mammon, which by the way doesn’t mean I produced it dishonestly, only that it, itself can’t be trusted) that is, if I can’t be faithful enough not to cling to it, how can God put anything more into my clenched fist? Especially if all I can be counted on to do is cling so fiercely to that as well.

And here I do find myself looping back to the first half of our reading. Because God would like to give me greater riches, that is, restoration and forgiveness and reconciliation, but if I can’t be trusted to behave with it like the dishonest manager did, if I want to claim it only for my own, as if I’d created it by my own effort, then, well, how can I be trusted with it?

Whew.



By the way. I stuck my study notes on the different uses of “I say to you” onto the end of this week’s piece. Not well organized or explained, but I’ll write that up another time and include a couple of “source criticism” thoughts. Thought some of you might like to “see my work.”

4:24 no conjunction

4:25 conjunction de

5:24, but it hardly counts, no conjunction speech the paralytic, not in conclusion to a teaching or parable

6:27 no conjunction

7:9 no conjunction

7:28 (no conjunction)

7:47 conjunction, xarin/charin therefore

9:27 lego de

10:12 no conjunction

11:8 no conjunction

11:51 no conjunction

12: 4 and 8 with conjunction does start new thought but “de” links them

12:5 (has no conjunction) The “I tell you” is for emphasis, not to introduce interpretation

12:27 lego de contrasting but connected thought

12:44 no conjunction

12:59 conclusion of a teaching about being reconciled to one’s accuser more for emphasis

13:3 and 5, no, “ouxi” particle. Again for emphasis, not to introduce a teaching/interpretation

13:24 gar... conjunction, same thought, for emphasis

13:35 de, in parentheses, same thought (copyist knew Luke’s tendency?)

14:24 lego gar same thought

15:7 no conjunction but uses houtos, in this way, to connect it to the previous parable

15:10 no conjunction

16:9 the subject of my study.. “KAI ego humin lego...” I suggest a new, but loosely related thought.

17:34 no conjunction, same thought, teaching not parable

18:8, no conjunction

18:14 no conjunction

18:17 no conjunction

19:26 no conjunction

19:40 kai apokritheis, lego humin...

21:3 kai eipen, alethos lego humin (conjunction not in Jesus’ speech)

21:32 no conjunction

22:16 conjunction gar

22:34 no conjunction

22:37 conjunction gar

23:44 (and) he said to them, truly I tell you conjunction? Kai, yes, but not part of Jesus’ speech

