

Title: The Answer is Yes

Date: 9/18/2022 (Proper 20, Year C)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Jeremiah 8:18-9:1](#); [Psalm 79:1-9](#); [1 Timothy 2:1-7](#); [Luke 16:1-13](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/jeuxGCGCyYo?t=1370>

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no physician there?

Why then has the health of my poor people
not been restored? (Jer 8:22)

Please be seated.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Gilead refers to an area to the east of the Jordan River, in the northwestern region of modern-day Jordan. The balm of Gilead was likely made from “myrrh,” a kind of resin, or sap-like substance from a certain species of small, thorny trees.¹ Most of us know myrrh as one of the three gifts of the magi- gold, frankincense and myrrh.²

Nowadays, if you find it on a list of ingredients, the balm of Gilead commonly refers to resin from a species of poplar trees found in North America. The resin from the bark or buds of these trees is used to make cough syrup, oils, and ointments, and these products are used to treat everything from skin conditions to muscle and bone pains to colds and laryngitis.³

Were these the kinds of wounds that Jeremiah was referring to?

Is this the kind of health he prays to God to restore?

It's tempting to say, “No, this is clearly metaphorical.”

How many of you are familiar with the African American Spiritual, “There is a balm in Gilead”?

In this hymn, we hear,

“There is a balm in Gilead/To make the wounded whole/There is a balm in Gilead/To heal the sin-sick soul.”⁴

This old Spiritual tells us that when we feel discouraged and think our work has been in vain, the Holy Spirit will revive our soul again.

It reminds us that when we cannot preach like Peter or pray like Paul, it is enough to tell the love of Jesus and say he died for all.

These words and the tune are calming and soothing. This song isn't so much a celebration, “There is a balm in Gilead! Woohoo!”

In these words, I hear a longing and a hope.

They come from memory, the collective memory of the people whom God led out of slavery and into the wilderness, out of the wilderness and into the promised land,
AND they are a promise and prayer for things to come.
We will be made whole.

But what do these words MEAN?

Looking closely at the lyrics of the hymn once again (Hymn #676, The Hymnal 1982), I have so many questions.

Is God talking about wounded individuals?
Or is God caring for a wounded people,
hurt by the painful divisions and lack of love among them?

Is the Holy Spirit reviving our soul from the inside,
by helping us be less attached to the results of our work
and to no longer define success by the standards of society
but instead by the standards of God?
Or is the Holy Spirit outside of us,
something we need to actively seek after and receive?

Is telling the love of Jesus sharing our personal stories
about the ways in which following Jesus has transformed our life?
Or is it about pointing people to Communion
so that when we consume the elements of bread and wine,
the body and blood of Christ,
we remember that just as
“we have been united with him in a death like his,
we will certainly be united with him in a
resurrection like his” (Rom 6:5)?

The answer to all these questions...is YES.

How many of you are familiar with the Episcopal framework of “both/and”? Writing it out looks like “both-slash-and.”

This is the idea that we can hold two different viewpoints at the same time, even if they are in tension, if not outright opposition.

The Church of England, which is the foundation for The Episcopal Church, was said to have walked the Middle Way between being Catholic and being Protestant. It may be hard to imagine now, but in the 1500s and 1600s being one or the other could get you thrown in prison, burned at the stake, or beheaded. So, it was hard to imagine a way to be both.

But that was the charge given to those who were responsible for defining this branch of Christianity.

They decided that being both Protestant and Catholic does NOT mean we add the two together and take the average. This does not mean we are at best a lukewarm Protestant or a halfhearted Catholic. **The goal is to take the best of both traditions.**

Like the Protestants, we believe that Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation (BCP 526, 868). That is an actual declaration I had to sign before I could be ordained a priest. We believe that we are justified by faith, not works, and only by the grace of God.

Like Catholics, we believe in the importance of the Sacraments, Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist, AND the sacramental rites, confirmation, ordination, marriage, confession, and healing the sick by anointing them with oil or the laying on of hands. They are outward and visible signs of the grace we **have received** from God and the grace of God we are **about to receive**.

The Episcopal church believes that how we worship, as in what we say and do and the things we use, shapes what we believe and how we live.⁵ In the house of God, silver cups and plates are for everyone, not just rich folks. We stand and sit and kneel to show respect and because practicing our faith means we practice with whole selves, mind and soul and BODY. This is why the Book of Common Prayer is so important to us.

On a side note, I want to be clear that this does NOT mean that Catholics don't believe that Scripture contains things necessary for salvation or that Protestants don't believe in the Sacraments. It's a matter of priority and degree.

Walking the Middle Way is a tradition we've inherited. The framework of "both/and" keeps us from settling for easy answers. It prevents us from dismissing other people's answers and encourages us to show one another the generosity of grace that God has shown us. It gives us permission to keep asking questions, to live in a space of creative tension and to not be locked into binaries of earth and heaven, body and mind, human and divine, male and female.

Moreover, when we hold the lessons we've learned **both** tightly **and** loosely, every time we hear a familiar parable, instead of assuming we know what it means, we hold it up again and see how it may be reflecting a different aspect of the light of Christ.

For any parable, especially the one we have today, the framework of "both/and" gives us permission to both simply take away and meditate on the conclusion, and to dive more deeply into the complex twists and turns of the parable.

With the framework of "both/and," we don't feel pressured to place a value judgment on these two choices. Both are good, and both are right. We approach the text, trusting that with the help of God and the people we are reading with, we will take away the lesson we need on this day, in this moment. After all, simple isn't the same thing as easy, and leaning into complexity may lead to more confusion rather than greater clarity.

The writer of the gospel according to Luke summarized today's parable with the declaration, "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Simple, clear, direct. We must be aware of whether we own our possessions, or if our possessions own us. End of sermon. Let's take that home and meditate on it this week.

That's when the questions start. What if we want to make money to help people? The more money we make, the more money we can give to the church, the more money we can use to help other people. As long as I don't hate and despise God, I'm good, right?

If we start trying to justify ourselves, if we feel threatened by this line of thinking, that will tell us a lot. We'd need to figure out why that is. We might want to ask whether our lives, or the mission of our church, would look different right now if our top priority is to serve God.

If we don't think it would look different, that's great. AND it would be good to ask our neighbors, people who aren't involved in our lives or our church, if they can tell who or what we are in service of by the way we live our lives and spend our money.

Maybe wealth isn't our other master,
maybe it's respectability,
maybe it's the need to take care of everyone else at the expense of ourselves.

On the other hand, if we delve more deeply into the complex twists and turns of the parable, there are so many other questions we can meditate on.

I wonder why Jesus tells the children of the light to be more like the children of this age.

Maybe being shrewd is about finding a way to connect with people in our generation rather than setting ourselves apart because we think we're somehow better.

Maybe being shrewd is about realizing that wealth that is hoarded does no one any good.

Maybe being shrewd is playing to the spiritual gifts that we **do** have. The manager knew he was too ashamed to beg and not strong enough to dig, so he found another way.

I wonder who gets to judge whether someone's wealth is honest or dishonest. The owners, the employees, the government, those who suffer the side effects from the production process, those who suffer the side effects of the products?

The amount we pay for something doesn't necessarily take into account ALL the costs making it incurs, human, environmental, spiritual. Dishonest wealth can refer to the

money made and also the money “saved.” I’m not just thinking of opioids and guns, I’m also thinking of the clothes we wear and the food we eat and the technology we use and the social media we consume.

I wonder what it means to be faithful with dishonest wealth. Is it about making the most of what we have? How is it possible to make that leap from dishonest wealth to true riches?

This line of questioning can lead to more confusion, but maybe it can help us reframe our questions until we gain greater clarity, especially if we tie it to specific in our lives rather than treat it as a mental exercise.

At the end of the day, it is both good to take this parable home and walk through it line by line AND to sit with the concluding verse about not serving two masters. It is both good to sink into the feeling in our bodies when we sing “There is a balm in Gilead” AND to meditate on the lyrics of that Spiritual. The choice is yours, and whichever choice you make **will be good**.

The grace of God knows no bounds, and the parables contain multitudes. May we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. May we have the will to keep turning toward God and to keep following Christ in thought, word, and deed.

Amen.

¹ <https://g.co/kgs/P7jfch>

² <https://www.britannica.com/place/Gilead-ancient-region-Palestine#ref130864>

³ <https://www.wise-geek.com/what-are-the-medicinal-uses-of-balm-of-gilead.htm>

⁴ https://hymnary.org/text/sometimes_i_feel_discouraged_spiritual

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fcMxl_6xsk

⁵ Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi