

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
August 28, 2022
Year C, 12 Pentecost, Proper 17
Worthy
The Rev. Leyla King

Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81:1, 10-16
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As many of you know, my family and I recently returned from a trip to England. It's funny how much you start thinking about the worth of things when you travel in a different country and have to account for different currencies. All of a sudden, whether or not an item is *worth* its price takes on added significance. I have stood in an English coffee shop for 20 minutes doing math – is that vanilla latte *really* worth 4 pounds, 10 pence? Is that what I *usually* pay in dollars for it in the States? Is it really worth that? And that's just a coffee!

But you don't have to be in a different country to worry about these things. Especially in these tough times with inflation climbing, many of us constantly do the math to count the costs: whether or not something's worth the price, what we can spend or must save to earn a profit in this uncertain economy. And our Scripture readings this morning ask us to consider these things, too – in some unexpected ways. Worth, profits, payments and repayments: all of today's readings use these economic terms.

Take the lesson from Jeremiah. Jeremiah speaks God's words to the ancient Israelites. God says to the people: Why have you gone away from me towards "worthless things?" God accuses the people of forgetting the true worth of God in their lives. They have been saved by God who brought them out of slavery, through the wilderness, into a land filled with good things. And it is God who promises them continued hope, sustenance and salvation. But they have thrown all that away and chased after "worthless" things instead, idols that are powerless and false gods from which they get no profit.

Jeremiah spoke to God's people thousands of years ago, but I think we, God's people today, had better hear this accusation, for we too often forget the worth of God in our lives. We can get distracted from God by ambition, or the desire for wealth, or the scramble for security, or just the daily busy-ness of our lives, things that are ultimately worthless when compared to the salvation we have been given by God through Christ. The price of that salvation was Christ's sacrifice on the cross and its worth to us is surely priceless.

Just as the Israelites were brought out from their oppression in Egypt, through Christ, we too are brought out from the fears and concerns that oppress us. Just as the Israelites were led through the wilderness, we too are led by Christ through the dark and fearful times. And just as the Israelites were given a fruitful land, so we too will find ourselves, with Christ, in the kingdom of God, that spiritual time and place of righteousness and satisfaction. This is the priceless gift of salvation that we have already been given by the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Now, the question is, what will we do with that salvation? Will we reject it, turning instead to those worthless things that profit us nothing? Or will we trust in the gift and live lives that reflect the knowledge of our salvation?

And if we accept it and let the assurance of our salvation shape us, what might that look like? How might our lives be transformed? How will the pricelessness of our salvation change the math we do when we consider the worth of everything – and every*one* – else?

For answers to those questions, we look to today's readings from the New Testament. In the final conclusion of an ancient sermon, a preacher tells the Hebrews: "Let mutual love continue" and "do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers." At the heart of the exhortations is the basic concept of hospitality, a generous love for others that involves recognizing the gifts we have already been given by God. Instead of clinging to what we have in order to secure ourselves in an uncertain future, we open our hands and hearts to others, in faith, because we know our own salvation has already been bought and paid for. And so, we find we can afford to show generosity – of wealth and spirit – even to strangers.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus provides a similar example of the effects of the assurance of our salvation. Again, the subject is radical hospitality. Jesus uses the image of a banquet to show what a life lived in joyful knowledge of salvation looks like. The righteous host, the host who understands the grace she has already been given, will not limit the feast she gives to her friends. Instead, she will invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind... because [these folks] cannot repay" what has been given to them.

And while Jesus certainly means that we are to invite into our lives the folks who are literally suffering, I think, in a more general way, "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" are also representative of the "strangers" towards whom the letter to the Hebrews encourages hospitality, too. After all, what is a stranger if not someone who is *strange* to you, someone who is wholly different from your own identity, your way of operating normally, as a blind person would seem to someone with sight. In this sense, then, Jesus's parable challenges us to understand all human beings as *worthy*. Even those who seem the most different from us are worthy of hospitality and love. Even the strangest of strangers is worth the risk we take to be in communion with them.

Because there's always risk when we're following Jesus. Righteousness *is* risky. Righteous folk are risk-takers, willing to be vulnerable to others for God's sake. That's why Jesus' admonition to invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" comes on the heels of another instruction about being humble. Those who know themselves to be loved by God don't worry about where they stand in the eyes of others. Those who know where their true identities lie aren't anxious about their place at the table. Instead, the righteous can afford to be humble; they can risk being vulnerable with others, even with those utterly different from them.

And let's not forget that we too, in our own ways, might be poor and crippled, lame and blind, broken and strange. But, even as Christ challenges us to see all others as worthy, he promises that we are equally so. We are so priceless to God, so unique, so lovable, so desirable, so wanted that God has made *us* worthy, too, by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, worthy of being loved by others and worthy of being loved by God. Amen.