

**The Lessons Appointed for
Use on the
Sunday closest to August 31**



**Proper 17
Year C
RCL**

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

The Collect

The Collect

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and

reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever
and ever. *Amen.*

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus says the LORD:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?

They did not say, “Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?”

I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things.

But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination.

The priests did not say, “Where is the LORD?” Those who handle the law did not know me;

the rulers transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal,
and went after things that do not profit.
Therefore once more I accuse you, says the LORD,
and I accuse your children's children.
Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look,
send to Kedar and examine with care;
see if there has ever been such a thing.
Has a nation changed its gods,
even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for something that does not profit.
Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
be shocked, be utterly desolate,
says the LORD,
for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water.

Psalm 81:1, 10-16

Exultate Deo

- 1 Sing with joy to God our strength *
and raise a loud shout to the God of Jacob.
- 10 I am the LORD your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt and said, *
“Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.”
- 11 And yet my people did not hear my voice, *
and Israel would not obey me.
- 12 So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their
hearts, *
to follow their own devices.
- 13 Oh, that my people would listen to me! *
that Israel would walk in my ways!
- 14 I should soon subdue their enemies *
and turn my hand against their foes.
- 15 Those who hate the LORD would cringe before him, *
and their punishment would last for ever.
- 16 But Israel would I feed with the finest wheat *
and satisfy him with honey from the rock.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who ex-

alt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

SERMON

This week, Session's question is, "What are we good at?" so, I started making lists of activities at which I thought we were adept. I felt I needed some more perspective, so I found someone to ask and posed the question to them. Their answer floored me. I was told that we aren't particularly good at anything.

"Really?", I asked, astounded. "We're not good at anything?"

"Really", came the reply. What followed was a catalog of what we do badly, accusations of our failures that ruined the rest of my day. What the heck? I'm trying to put together a sermon here, not do an autopsy!

The comments, harsh as they were, made me think more deeply on Session's question. That often happens to me during sermon preparation. During sermon prepara-

ration time I am constantly attentive for God's guiding hand. Very often, something completely off the wall will happen that leads me in a new direction. When I speak to you of God-with-us, when I tell you of my conviction that God does not sit separate from us, judging us from heaven's viewpoint but rather goes with us in our struggle through life, I'm serious about that. When something so completely over-the-top as this conversation drops into my lap, I have to ask if I am being led to a message with deeper and more significant roots than a simple list of things we do (or don't do) well. Ultimately, I concluded that "What are we good at?" is the wrong question to ask because it focuses our attention upon ourselves, and away from God. My suspicion was confirmed when I read our prayer of confession (which the secretary gets from some site on the Internet). We confessed

...that we love attention. We are pleased when people single us out for something good that we have done, for some outstanding act or trait of kindness that we exhibit. We revel in the light; but the seductive light too often captures us ...

That's exactly what I am talking about. We'd like to believe that it's all about us and what we're good at, but that is the wrong focus. What are we good at? Nothing! Only the Father is good. God spoke through Jeremiah and asked, "What did I do wrong so that my people turned their backs on me? I gave them life and value and they chase after garbage. What the heck? Why are they so blinded by their own pride?"

An alternate reading for today is from the Wisdom of Sirach. It was written about 200 years before Jesus. This book is canonical for Catholics, though not for us. Nevertheless, Sirach nails it:

The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker. For the beginning of pride is sin, and the one who clings to it pours out abominations.

And Jeremiah, written perhaps 400 years before Sirach, agrees:

Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

When we get prideful about what we do well, Jeremiah says, we turn ourselves into crackpots, and that is not a good thing, church. Not good at all. We, and all other churches, are not entitled to pride of accomplishment. The only “right” answer to the question, “What are we good at?” is an expression of humility and obedience and rejection of self-granted pride.

“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

As upset as I became at the words of the person I asked, I was hearing the word God wanted me to hear. Without that testimony, I suppose I would have gone on about who knows what, trying to please you with flattery. With the aid of my witness’s indictment, I was given a chance to focus on questions much more important than whether or not we keep the bushes trimmed properly.

Now for the other side of the coin. Does the confession that we don't do anything well mean that we're good for nothing? No, it does not. This church has, for two generations, provided continuity and stability empowering individual witness to the city of Bellefonte and beyond. That's something to be acknowledged, but not something for which we can take credit. The church and the lives of individual Christians are the tools God uses in His creation. To God be the glory, for the accomplishment belongs to God. Trying to take credit or prideful ownership of it is to speak as a crackpot. Those things you may think you have done well are the cracked cisterns of which Jeremiah spoke. They are exactly the sort of things I would have gone after for this sermon if God hadn't placed the person to whom I spoke in my path. You aren't wise enough to evaluate when you have served God as He chose you to do. But

you are wise enough to know that without the steadiness of this church and all it has represented to the community for all these years, you surely would have gone off the track, gone after worthless things, and become worthless yourselves.

To be brutally honest, we sit in a sanctuary not a quarter filled. Empty churches in this county sit upon the real estate market with no offers to buy. We live in a prideful world of generalized secularism which celebrates its own accomplishments, but has little interest or energy to pursue the tasks of God. God's church, however small and dwindling it may appear, still speaks of God's love to a world too self-involved to hear. Though not one in four hears, God's church still speaks. Though we proudly proclaim, "In God we Trust", what we do is separate children from their parents, place them in cages, refuse to vaccinate them against flu, and make

them sleep under aluminum foil blankets. Jeremiah roars the words God gave him to speak over this outrage:

Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

Speak church! Speak through the lives of your people!

sing with joy to God our strength and raise a loud shout to the God of Jacob.

Guide us in your way, and grant to us ears to hear, hands fit for the work, lives worthy of you.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

The Epistle for this Sunday is from Hebrews and begins this way:

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

As we see what is happening at our southern borders, let us remember that such actions are not formed in mutual love, but in love of self and those like me. Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you

peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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