

Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Texts: 2 Sam 22:26-34; 1 Cor 10:6-13; Luke 16:1-9

August 1, 2021

## Connect the Dots

Listening to the Word of God, there's always the danger of hearing only what you want to hear, and not hearing all that you need to hear. Oftentimes, we only hear in ***one-word, one-blurb sound bites***, to the exclusion of everything else. We're good at hearing a dot or two, but we're not so good at connecting all the dots to see what God has in store for us. Case in point, with all that's going on in our world today, the words of St. Paul to those foolish Corinthian Christians resonate with us. *"These things happened to them [the Old Testament Israelites] as an example, written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come."* Another way of saying this would be: *"Those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it."* We know from Biblical history that Old Testament Israel did a lot of ***stupid and unfaithful things***, and they suffered the consequences for their wicked and adulterous and idolatrous ways, time and time and time again. It's like they ***never*** learned from their own history; the very definition of insanity; i.e., doing the same thing again and again and yet expecting a different result. St. Paul, in speaking to the fair-weather Christians in Corinth, directs them to their theological history. *"You're doing the same thing those fools did. They were adulterous and idolatrous. They put God to the test. They grumbled and complained and mocked God, and they suffered the consequences. Learn from your history! That's why God wrote all this stuff down for you; so you're not doomed to repeat it!"* And with that, we look around at all that's going on in our world, and we shake our heads in utter disbelief. We still haven't learned from our history. It's insane. We're still doing the same dumb and wicked things our forefathers have done, and we're still shocked when God permits us to suffer ***minor consequences*** for our wicked, murderous, and idolatrous ways. That's not the message. That's just one dot of the message.

Let's flip things around a bit. ***What about the history we should learn and repeat?*** Not all repetition of history is a bad thing; i.e., something to be avoided. Paul never says *"Don't ever repeat your history."* What he says is, *"Learn from your history."* There is a difference. There are lots of good and faithful examples for us to emulate as we make our way through this vale of tears. Think about this in light of all the temptations and struggles and pains and sorrows that daily assail us. ***Are these struggles unique or new to mankind?*** We often like to use the word "unprecedented" when speaking of our recent/current trials and tribulations, but it's simply not true. It may be all new to us, but there's nothing unique/new about what we're experiencing. It's not like **NO ONE** else in all of history has ever struggled with wars and rumors of wars, and pandemics and plagues, and government corruption and political unrest and fear and economic uncertainty. Even closer to home, it's not like no one else in all of history has ever had to deal with a sick/dying loved one or job loss or low checkbook balance or a coup full of bills. *"It's all so unprecedented!"* **No... it's not.**

**Folks: Read the Scriptures!** These things are all written down for a reason...for us and for our salvation! ***You're not the only one to ever have a bad day or a bad stretch!*** I think Job would have something to say about that, right? You're not the only one to ever suffer or struggle or worry or grieve. There is NOTHING new under the sun, and no temptation/struggle/strife has overtaken you that is not common to all man. ***Well... what can we learn from our own history? What have the faithful always done when things get tough?*** Folks: The answer is staring you in the face. The answer—God's eternal and unchanging answer—is being held out to you, without fail, without conditions, and without end. ***This [Word and Sacrament] is what the faithful have always understood and fled to and held fast to.*** When tumult and tribulation rear their ugly heads; when Christians are made to feel fear and terror, the churches have always been filled with the faithful fleeing to God. There's another dot. This isn't the whole message. It's just one more dot in the message.

Such a one-dot, heard-all-I-need-to-hear attitude tends to narrowly put the focus on ourselves and what we need to do/not do; e.g. learn from our history; emulate the good and don't repeat the bad. Now depart in peace. Folks: You know as well as I do that the Christian faith is all about Jesus. It's not about what you need to do or not do. If it were, then Jesus didn't need to die. All the focus of the Christian faith is to be on Almighty God. And that's where all three of these lessons tie together so beautifully: All the focus is on a proper understanding of Almighty God—our unchanging, eternal Almighty God.

Now, I know at this point we can listen to how King David speaks of God in the Old Testament lesson, and we nod our heads in agreement. We get it. Nothing really jumps out at us. *“With the merciful You show Yourself merciful; with the blameless man You show Yourself blameless; with the purified You deal purely.”* God shows us all these things about Himself, and it all makes sense. That's just who He is—merciful, blameless, and pure. Okay... but what about “tortuous”? Is God “tortuous”? Bear in mind: This is NOT “torturous.” To be tortuous means that you're “crooked, unfair, or unjust.” Well... we know that God isn't crooked or unfair or unjust. That could never be! Rather, He only *seems* to be tortuous (which is what the text says). This makes sense, right? A lot of bad and crooked and wicked things happen in our lives, and we tend to put the blame on God, as if He's the culprit. *“Why, God?! What have I done to deserve this?! How could you do this to me?!”* In those moments of sorrow and grief and despair, God does seem to be tortuous, maybe even uncaring, absent, or indifferent; perhaps even a bit torturous. *“What kind of God would permit this kind of evil?!”* That doesn't sound like someone who really/truly knows God, does it? But wait! There's more!

The Hebrew word that we translate as “*tortuous, crooked, unfair, unjust*” (*pawthal*) can also be understood as “*shrewd,*” that is, “*clever and astute.*” Shrewd: That’s the same language Jesus uses in our parable, but such shrewdness is praised there, isn’t it? \*This is important to understand. The dishonesty and thievery of the dishonest manager in the Gospel lesson isn’t being praised, but his shrewdness is; that is, his *cleverness and astuteness*. His shrewdness is praised precisely because he is brilliantly showing forth the master’s mercy, using it to his advantage. **He KNOWS his Master.** He knows how He thinks and how He’ll respond. There wasn’t the slightest whiff of doubt. He had absolute trust in the mercy and grace of the boss. Mercy and grace? Folks: Jesus never said that the proverbial boss canceled or amended any of the deals that the dishonest manager had struck with the debtors. *In fact, that’s precisely what the manager was banking on.* He knew, without a doubt, that the boss would fully honor the forgiveness that had been set forth in His name and authority. He knew that the boss would show mercy to those people. He knows the master is *merciful and just*, and he knows that the master won’t renege on the tortuous, crooked, and unfair deals that were made in his name. The forgiveness would stand. That’s just who the boss was, by nature—a man of His Word.

This guy, shrewdly/cleverly/astutely banking on the integrity and mercy of the master, winds up looking like a hero in the customers’ eyes. By means of unrighteous mammon; i.e., money and goods and deals made to reduce the debts on those goods, he shrewdly/cleverly/astutely secures for himself a nice little future. Because of the boss’ *unconditional integrity, mercy and forgiveness*, the dishonest steward could be assured of his future. He knew that those who were so richly shown grace would, in turn, show him grace. They’d help him out. This shrewdness/cleverness/astuteness is what is praised. If a wicked man knows the Master’s mercy and knows how to make use of it, shouldn’t you know better?

I want you to think about all this, and before you get all bent out of shape, remember the Old Testament lesson. *The shrewdness and cleverness and astute wisdom of God is certainly something to be praised, is it not?* God works all things for the good of those who love Him, right? Look no further than right here [the cross]. Who would EVER think that this is good/victory?! Yes, God absolutely seems to be crooked and unfair and unjust (not to mention torturous) in this wretched display, doesn’t He? Here is His wrath against sin, battered, bloodied, and nailed on a cross for all the world to see. Here is how God views and handles our sin! He puts His own innocent, blameless, pure Son to death because of it. A truly pure and innocent man paid the ultimate price for our sins! Holy and sinless God died for our wretched sins! That’s about as tortuously crooked and unfair as you can get!

And make no mistake: This is **exactly** what the devil wanted all along—the death of God—never realizing that this is *exactly* what God wanted and man

needed for salvation. It was only after it was too late that the devil finally caught on to the whole tortuous plan. “*Save yourself. Prove that you’re God and come down off that cross!*” It didn’t work. That demonic fool was too late. ***Talk about divine shrewdness and wisdom!*** God used the devil and his minions to bring about their own defeat. Thinking they were winning, He let them destroy themselves by laying down His life for each and every sin of the entire crooked world, mine and yours included. By means of this all-atoning death, God Himself showed and proved that mankind’s debt of sin was paid for in full. “*It is finished, once and for all!*” Nothing and no one was left out. This cruciform shrewdness is certainly worthy of all praise and thanksgiving!

My fellow redeemed: This is what it’s all about! ***Connect the dots!*** Learn from your history. What have the faithful, for all time, said and thought about Almighty God? What have they clung to, in good times, in bad times, richer, poorer, in sickness and in health? What has the unchanging and eternal God been telling us and showing us, without fail, from the beginning of time? ***All of this is written down for you; for your sake. God tells you all that you need to know! Connect the dots!*** Trust in your Lord. He is a loving and gracious God... ALWAYS. You can bet the farm on it! There is no debt that He can’t or won’t forgive. This is for certain. How can I say such a thing? Easy! ***Look to the proof. Look to the cross of Jesus.*** Look to the cross that He nailed His own Son to...for you, for me, and for the entire world. This is absolute proof that your Lord loves you and forgives you. Let there be no doubt! Your heavenly Father loved you so much that He gave His only-begotten Son to die for you!

And that’s how we bring this to a close, with all the focus where it needs to be: on Christ. May your heavenly Father, through the undeserved and unmerited gift of faith He works in you through His Holy Spirit, keep you steadfast in this one, true cruciform faith unto life everlasting. When your Lord calls you to give an account of all that He has so graciously entrusted to your care and management, may you go with the sure and certain joy and peace that comes with believing that without a doubt that ***you are completely redeemed because of God’s grace alone, which is yours because of the all-atoning work of Jesus Christ alone.*** May your Lord commend you—**now and always**—for your faithfulness; repentant faithfulness that is witnessed in your management of all that He has entrusted to your care, and repentant faithfulness that is witnessed in all that you say, think, and do as His baptized and redeemed children by grace.

To Christ be all the glory!

**AMEN**