

**“Learning from Even More Miserable Company”**

**Judges 4:1–7; Matthew 25:14-30**

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“Guilt is the gift that keeps on giving,” we often note, but there are other things that work this way. The year 2020 seems to be quite persistent as a donor of unpleasant gifts, though the truth is there is no guarantee that any of these gifts — COVID-19, racial injustice, political division — will magically disappear on January 1, 2021. They are all gifts that keep on giving, and now it seems that the 2020 election is too!

We knew that not everything would be resolved the evening of the election. Things have often not been final that day, as some seem to forget, and in this year of voting during a pandemic, we knew it would take more time. But where we are now, with a fairly clear outcome yet no acknowledged resolution, is unprecedented. Whether we are happy with the outcome, outraged by it and wanting it to be contested, or just wanting it to be over, one thing everyone can agree upon is that we are living through an ongoing mess in our national life.

We knew that no matter what the result of the election was, we would still have deep divisions and thus the real challenge would come after the election — finding a way to bring people together so that we can face critical challenges, like the pandemic, more successfully. But now, the challenge seems even greater than expected. It is difficult to imagine how we can build bridges across some divisions. And the fact that basic givens like science and truth are thrown out by some simply adds to the chaos. When we take it all in, we might well observe with Deputy Marshal Samuel Gerard in *The Fugitive*, “My, my, my, what a mess.”

Where do we turn for help in a time like this? As people of faith, we turn to scripture and there we find an odd sort of help, and perhaps something more. I have noted before a wise refinement of the old adage, “Misery loves company,” which is, “Misery loves equally miserable

company.” But today we are going to examine some even more miserable company and seek to learn something from these people.

I am talking about the nation of Israel as described in the book of Judges. If we think our nation is in chaos, we need only consider this nation. These are God’s favored people, we recall, people delivered from bondage in Egypt, guided through a wilderness and delivered into the Promised Land. So, how do they demonstrate their gratitude? By being disloyal to God repeatedly and then suffering the consequences.

There is a cycle that plays out over and over again in this book. It is *Groundhog Day* on steroids! After being given a host of blessings, the people rebel. “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord,” our reading says, as do many passages in this book. As a result, God abandons the people to the consequences of their own behavior. Eventually, when the people have suffered enough, they realize the error of their ways and cry out to God for help. And this time, like every other time, God responds with mercy.

The specific form of this mercy is to raise up a judge — a political and military leader — to free the Israelites from oppression and guide them to stability. This time, quite extraordinarily, the judge is a woman, Deborah. She may be the best judge of all, not just because she provides forty years of peace, but because she is a prophet and “judge” in the sense in which we think of judges, in addition to being a political and military leader.

There is another influential woman in this story, Jael, a covert operative who takes out the enemy’s general, Sisera, by luring him into a tent and then driving a tent peg into his temple. For those who are waiting for a female James Bond, she already exists — in the Bible! And those who insist that the Bible forbids women from taking on leadership roles should actually read the Bible sometime!

Anyway, the people rebel and then suffer. They cry out to God for help and God responds with mercy. And the specific form of this mercy is a new judge who can lead the people to a better place — Deborah, in this case, whose story is first told through prose in Judges 4 and then by poetry in Judges 5. But in response to God’s gift of mercy, the people will eventually rebel again and start the whole process over again. So,

the big picture throughout the story is of chaos, a mess, national life that makes ours appear not quite so bad by comparison.

So, is this the only message here, that there are people even worse off than us? Perhaps Kris Kristofferson's song "Jesus Was a Capricorn" was right in insisting that "everybody's gotta have somebody to look down on, who they can feel better than at any time they please." It does at least provide some context. We are not the only people to struggle to get national life right. But there is more to learn from this text and these people. There is good news to help us in this time.

For one thing, every time the people cry out for help, God responds with mercy. Whenever we have struggles — whether as individuals, as a church or as a nation — someone is quick to point out that it is the judgment of God. What sins we are being judged for, of course, varies as some point to perceived, individual moral failings while others point to various social ills. But the common thread is that suffering, including national suffering, is the direct result of Divine Judgment.

God does abandon the Israelites to the consequences of their own behavior. We might draw a parallel with our abuse of the earth. We are reaping what we have sown. But God does not directly punish people and nations. The Holocaust alone removes all validity to that argument, though there are many other illustrations of the same reality. If God did not intervene directly when seven million lives were being taken, when would God intervene directly? And what sort of God would that be?

What God does in scripture when the people cry out for help is respond with mercy — mercy, not judgment; mercy, not punishment. So, if we are feeling desperate about these times, and desperation does not seem entirely out of place, we should call upon God for help and expect God to provide it. Of course, God's help comes on God's terms. There is no guarantee that God will confirm all of our biases or cater to all our whims. But God will provide mercy in some form.

But there is another bit of good news here. It is not found explicitly in the Judges narrative, though it is a possibility. It is a message more directly connected to the reading from Matthew, Jesus' parable of the talents. But the good news is this — the people are free to

choose a different path at any point; in the context of God's mercy, they can choose to break the cycle and be faithful to God. They do not make this choice in an enduring way. But they can. They are not destined to repeat the errors of the past. Nor are we.

This is the message of Jesus' parable. It is a message about taking responsibility. We have all heard numerous stewardship sermons on this text, including one or two from me. And it certainly does speak to stewardship. The "talents" in this story are not gifts or abilities, but currency, a large amount of currency. One talent is worth fifteen years' wages. So, even the servant who is left to manage just one talent may be managing close to a million dollars.

But they are all managing assets, not possessing them. They are stewards, not owners. So, the parable — which is about the kingdom or realm of God anyway, not financial investment — focuses on what people do with what they are given. We have a choice, we have power, we have agency over what we do with everything we have — financial resources, talents and abilities, opportunities and responsibilities. And in God's realm, what we are called to do is not just sit on our gifts and preserve them, make sure things don't get any worse, but do everything can to make things better. Our ability to effect change in any realm is limited, but we are called to do what we can.

Set aside the ancient Israelites' struggle in this realm. What are our prospects right now? Whether we are talking about our personal struggles, the condition of the church or the state of the nation, will we give in and simply repeat the patterns of the past or will we choose to do something different and better in the ways we can?

Thinking specifically about national life, it is easy to understand why people might feel discouraged. It feels like we are stuck in a cycle very much like that of ancient Israel. We may not be destined to repeat the errors of the past, but we have lived with gridlock and back and forth swings of power between the two parties for a very long time. Whoever was out is now in and thus ready to push back on the other side. There is always talk of compromise and bridgebuilding but little more than talk. Even when parties agree that some goal is in everyone's best

interest, we don't want the other side getting credit for any accomplishment. So, we block it.

It is a dismal picture, but it is reality, and it has only intensified in the past few years for numerous reasons... Mitch Albom put it this way in an op-ed piece published by *The Detroit Free Press* last week.

We have more than taken sides in America. We have tunneled moats. In the name of 'our way' we have demeaned, denigrated, destroyed. We've lost friends, alienated families, split our communities by lawn signs. We have hurt one another, emotionally and even sometimes physically. Yet far from looking at our guilty hands in regret, we continue to make fists and shake them across the great divide.

Is this who we want to be?

Albom describes the problem well, but he frames the question in an even better way — is this who we want to be? We hope and pray not, and we do have a choice, but what will we choose? To continue the patterns of the past or to do what we can to listen more deeply to others, resist the temptation to caricature, refuse to repost the meanspirited and often unfounded claim, try our best to love our neighbor even if he/she is our political opponent/enemy? We do have a choice.

In like manner, on issues of race, it seems like we have been stuck in a cycle for a long time. We make some progress, there is a move toward calm, but then some event awakens us to the reality that we still do not have a level playing field. We argue about that reality, make some superficial changes, and then presume that we have addressed the genuine concerns adequately, which we have not. And so, we repeat the pattern all over again. It is *Groundhog Day* on steroids, the period of Judges when everyone did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

But we have a choice as to what we do this time around in the cycle. We can stay with the process longer, be willing to remain uncomfortable because that's what it takes, have the courage to look deeper into our own hearts and lives, and just ask that simplistic, pious

sounding question — what would Jesus do? Or what would he have us to do now in this matter? I think we know the answer.

Like some of you perhaps, I watched a new public television piece last week on the rise of the Nazis in Germany. Every time I revisit this part of history, it's like watching *Titanic*, only worse, far worse. I know how the story ends, tragically, and I wish there were something I could do to change the outcome, but I can't. Yet nor can I pull myself away from the screen. I suppose I am hoping to learn something to help me understand better what happened, what went wrong, what could have been different.

We cannot change the past, but we can learn from it, and we can choose to do something different. Whether we have one talent, two talents or five talents, we have something to work with in our lives, our church and our nation. Like ancient Israel, we have experienced God's mercy again and again. What are we willing to do in response to this gift?