“Dependence”

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Bethany Presbyterian Church

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

February 16, 2025 – 6th Sunday after Epiphany

***Jeremiah 17:5-10***

***Thus says the Lord:  
Cursed are*** ***those who*** ***trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength,  whose hearts turn away from the Lord.  
6They shall be like a shrub in the desert  and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.***

***7Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.  
8******They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.***

***9The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it?  
10I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.***

***Luke 6:17-26***

***[Jesus] He came down with them [his disciples] and stood on a level place with*** ***a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. 18They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases, and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19And everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.***

***20Then he looked up at his disciples and said:***

***“Blessed are you who are poor,  for yours is the kingdom of God.  
21“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.  
“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.***

***22“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.***

***24“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.  
25“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.  
“Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.***

***26“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.***

Dependence on God.

I mean, real dependence. On God.

That’s a tough one.

Both texts today are a challenge for us, to determine just how much we rely on God, and how much we rely on merely human measures.

Today’s text starts out with Jeremiah, sending out a curse; and with Jesus describing who will be blessed and who will be in great distress. It sounds like some real boundary setting is present in both texts, and it’s not all good news.

Why would text like this show up during the season of Epiphany – a time when we celebrate the holiness of the coming of Christ and his early ministry? It’s as if there has been a subtle shift in tone in our texts for the last few weeks. We began on the heels of Christmas with feelings of glory and amazement early in Epiphany, and are moving toward the season of Lent with scripture that has a little bit more of an edge.

We begin today with the prophet Jeremiah, sending out a curse to “those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. 6 They shall be like a shrub in the desert and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.”

Commentator Meg Jenista reminds us “in Jeremiah’s time, the political context kept raising the question of the nation’s reliance, …. on a kind of strong man.  The Hebrew word used for man in vs. 5 is not a generic term for humanity but has a connotation of something like a “macho” or “strong” man.  The people would prefer to hide behind a hero than trust the Lord out in the open.”5 “All of this, then, is a set up for disappointment.”5

For Jeremiah, critique of those relying only on mere mortals refers to those who are “relying solely on human institutions like strong armies, secure borders, national independence.” Judging success on these standards is “as shallow as the roots of a shrub.”6 A shrub, kind of desperately searching for water in the desolate spaces.

A tree however, “planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.” This is the life of one who trusts in the Lord.

Pairing this portion of Jeremiah with the text for today from the gospel of Luke is an ideal way to enhance the meaning and teaching style of Jesus and the beatitudes.

We talked a little bit last week about how the author of the gospel of Luke was very careful about how the order of events were placed in such a way as to enhance the message of that particular gospel writer. We described how Luke placed the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law before the calling of Simon and James and John, in order to emphasize that Simon had met Jesus before, and therefore had a modicum of reason to do what Jesus asked him to do. Today’s text has other changes from the order of events in the other gospels. After calling Simon Peter and James and John last week, Jesus did some more teaching in the general geographic area, and then went up on a mountain top with his disciples to rest. While on the mountain top with some followers, Jesus called all twelve of his disciples and called them apostles.

Our text today picks up there. We begin when Jesus comes down from the mountain with his disciples. Already here is the first change. This portion of Luke is called the Sermon on the Plain, as opposed to what you may have heard of as the Sermon on the Mount. Coming down the mountain, the disciples and Jesus see a great crowd a great crowd of “his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. 18 They had come *to hear him* and *to be healed* of their diseases, and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.”

Once again, it is the order of events that Luke has changed just a bit. They came to hear, and be healed. But Jesus healed, and then spoke. Commentator Chelsey Harmon asks, “Did Jesus know the people could **hear better when their wounds were healed**?” She writes, “Most assuredly, those who were **“troubled with unclean spirits” could hear God speak more fully without the shadows** of the enemy holding tight within them.”6 We have all experienced this in some form or another. We know that dire circumstances takes up our entire mind and heart as we struggle to survive, make the right decisions, care for ourselves and those we love. Illness, poverty, loss of a job or a home, natural disasters. And then there are just our unending worries! Imagine being free of those dire circumstances, have a clear mind for making decisions, have the wherewithal to care for ourselves and those we love, etc. This is what being healed feels like. We wish it for ourselves, and we should wish it for everyone. Because Christ didn’t come for you and me alone. Christ came for the world.

Yet another plea for us to feed the hungry, help the suffering, and clothe the naked. By doing so we are signaling that releasing another from suffering is the call of we who want to spread the love of Christ. By feeding and clothing, by releasing another from suffering, we give that person the dignity and agency to live fully into what God is calling them to do – and not into the life we think they are called to live.

Imagine Jesus comes down the mountain, 19 And everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Not, blessed are you who are poor in spirit.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Not hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

These beatitudes from Luke are real life right now issues. Poor. Hungry now. Weep now. There is a down to earth, make-no-mistake message about who Jesus promised these things to. We don’t have to figure out what poor in spirit means. We don’t have to figure out what it means to be meek. We don’t have to figure out if someone is hungry for righteousness. These beatitudes as written by Luke are economic, biological, psychological poverty, hunger and suffering. The message from this writer with these beatitudes is “when the evidence suggests that you have been forgotten or forsaken, you are not. With the beatitudes, Jesus announces that the provision of God is trustworthy when the world is offering poverty, hunger, grief, and rejection. Those who do the hating and exclusion, those who make up lies about others and act revulsed are also in need of healing. They will be healed if they heed Jesus’s woes.”2

For those in the crowd who have placed their trust elsewhere, much like the audience for Jeremiah who have “trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength,” the woes are warnings. Woe to you who are rich because that’s as good as it’s going to get. You have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, because you too will feel both sides of the realities of life. If you are full you will be hungry at some point. If you are laughing now, you will weep at some point. Woe to you if all speak well of you, because we know from history and our ancestors that there is more to the story. If people speak only good of someone, remember that is how the false prophets were treated.

When Jesus came down the mountain with his disciples and saw the crowds first he healed, and *then he looked at his disciples*. Were these blessings and woes meant only for Jesus’ disciples, as a teaching, or was Jesus also speaking maybe also to those who were close by, but perhaps not the entire crowd. We don’t know. The message seems to be for those who were putting their hope in this man Jesus and his teachings. The message is for the Church, those who are here interested in listening and being healed in this way. For those of us who are the Church, for those not just overhearing, but actually listening to hear this message, we should “rejoice to be treated so, to leap for joy and look to heaven because [we] will discover that [we] are in a long line of people throughout history who have chosen to be on God’s side of justice, mercy, peace, and love that works for everyone’s good—even ]our] enemies’.”6

Let’s pray,

1<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-175-10-3>

O’Brien, Julia M., February 2025

2<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-617-26-3>

Shore, Mary Hinkle, February 2025

3Martin, George H., (Jeremiah) Working Preacher Commentary, Year C, Volume 1, pp.338-343.

4Gregory, Howard K., (Luke) Working Preacher Commentary, Year C, Volume 1, pp.356-361.

5<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-02-10/jeremiah-175-10-3/>

Jenista, Meg, February 2025

6 <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-02-10/luke-617-26-3/>

Harmon, Chelsey

7Byron, Gay L., (Luke) Working Preacher Commentary, Year C, Volume 1, pp.356-361.