

16 February 2025
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalms 1

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

In the Name of the One, Holy, and Living God. Amen.

This morning's readings are full of "on one hand..." and "on the other hand." A Reader's Digest version might be: cursed/blessed; happy/un; resurrection/no; blessed /woe.

Jeremiah and the Psalmist pose similar questions: "who do you trust" and "who are you not going to hang out with." Those who trust in God, those who don't throw in their lot with the wicked, the sinners, and the scornful will find themselves like trees planted by the water, able to withstand the anxieties of drought and heat, never ceasing to bear fruit.

On the other hand, those that trust in their own power will find themselves dried up and withered – like tumbleweed.

In writing to the Corinthians, St. Paul takes up the image of fruit, of first fruits, to insist that the good news of Jesus is bound up in his bodily resurrection. For Paul, this belief is not optional. If there is no resurrection, there is no hope. If there is no resurrection, then everything we thought we knew about God is a lie.

If there is no resurrection, then all we have is this life. And the so-called gospel is not really "good news" at all. It's less a question than a rhetorical mic drop.

The theme of either/or carries forward into today's Gospel as well. In the passage just before our reading begins, Jesus had spent the night in prayer up on the mountain, and selected twelve of the disciples to serve as apostles. When day comes, Jesus brings them all down to a level place, a plain, where a large crowd of all sorts of people (even Gentiles) has gathered. The text tells us that Jesus heals not just a few but *all* of those who come to him; *all* those who are diseased and troubled, in every imaginable way. The kept grabbing for Jesus, because power was just pouring out of him.

It is easy to hear "blessed are..." and think, "ah, the sweet Sermon on the Mount." But Luke's Sermon on the Plain differs from Matthew's version. In Luke, Jesus is speaking about the literal poor, hungry, mourning, and persecuted. In addition to "blessings," Jesus includes "woes" or warnings for the rich, the full, the laughing, and the reputable.

And how do we who are generally not poor, nor hungry, nor reviled – how do we hear these hard words? In truth, they ought not be news to us. Luke’s gospel is full of the upside-down nature of God’s reign.

In Advent, we heard the *Magnificat*, Mary’s exuberant song of God’s pattern of transforming grace. “The mighty may be flying high now, but they will be brought low,” Mary sang. “Those who are pressed down will be lifted up, the empty filled, and those who are full will taste what it feels like to be empty...”

I’ve always thought of this passage like the Sorting Hat at Hogwarts. “You go to the blessed group. You go to the woe group.” Maybe you have, too.

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On Tuesday, as I sat with my Connecticut clergy colleagues on Zoom, I was reminded of a revelation that happened three years ago with the same set of lessons. It centered on verse 20 where, Jesus’ healing of all the people had been completed, Jesus turns to the disciples and said, “blessed are...” In other words, Jesus gives the disciples instructions about blessings and woes that seem to be a direct result of his ministering to the crowds.

“OMG,” one of my group said, “instead of seeking blessing or trying to avoid judgment, the Sermon on the Plain becomes instruction for discipleship. Jesus gives us a tool; a lens through which we can encounter our neighbor.”¹

If you look at the world with even half-open eyes, you can see that it is a mess. We Christians believe that we are headed toward a heavenly banquet, where *everyone* will have a place at the table. But, my friends in Christ, the fulfillment of that vision calls on us to work with God and with our companions in this world to get the heavenly banquet started here and now. The shape of God’s future must shape our present.²

Gustavo Gutierrez, the late Dominican priest and progenitor of what we now call Liberation Theology wrote this: “God has a preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God’s will.”³

¹ Thank you, Pastor Kathleen Mills of Holy Trinity, Trumbull (CT) for the reminder!

² Attributed to Reformed theologian David Holwerda (1932-2022), but I cannot locate an exact source.

³ “Song and Deliverance” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, quoted by R. Alan Culpepper in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Luke*.

Jane Addams, social reformer and founder of Chicago's Hull House (1889) wrote, "The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain, is floating in mid-air, until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life."⁴

For many of us, I suspect, desperate need isn't at the forefront of our everyday living. The commentator Debie Thomas puts it this way: "There isn't much in my circumstances that leads me to a sense of urgency about ultimate things. I can go for days without talking to or thinking about God ... This isn't because I'm callous. It's because — as Jesus puts it so wisely in his searing sermon — I am already "full." I have already "received my consolation." I have easy access to laughter, so I don't wonder what lessons honest tears might yield. I am primed by my cozy life to live in the shallows, unaware of the treasures that lie waiting in the depths."⁵

Today, the Risen and Living Jesus calls us to follow him, to come with him, to be with those he came to help and heal: the poor, the hungry, the broken and the abandoned. The world wants us to be frightened of the other; the world wants us to think of Us and Them. Jesus is singing a different song.

In his blunt fashion, the late Frederick Buechner put it this way:

"If the world is sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party.

The world says, Mind your own business,
and Jesus says, There is no such thing as your own business.

The world says, Follow the wisest course and be a success,
and Jesus says, Follow me and be crucified.

The world says, Drive carefully — the life you save may be your own — and Jesus says,
Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

The world says, Law and order, and Jesus says, Love.

The world says, Get and Jesus says, Give.

In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion."⁶

⁴ Addams, "The Subjective Necessity of Social Settlements," which was republished in *Philanthropy and Social Progress* (1893), p. 7.

⁵ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2089-blessings-and-woes>, slightly altered.

⁶ Originally published in *The Faces of Jesus* (1974).

So, my dear friends in Christ, do not lose heart, and do not be afraid. The deepest and truest source of life is not far off and is never spent. We *are* called to the heavenly banquet. We are also called to get the shopping done, get the meal prepared and the table set, and the invitations delivered – to everyone. Now. It's work, it's hard work. We can't do it alone, but we're never, ever, on our own. God is with us, always. Remember the words of Jeremiah: "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord." Amen.