

2.13.22

We find one of the most enduring images from Scripture in the seventeenth chapter of Jeremiah, the Old Testament lesson for today, as the tortured young Prophet borrows from our Psalm for this morning to describe two ways of life. One is that of a wise person who trusts the Lord. That kind of person is compared to a tree planted by streams of water in the desert. This image should be so familiar to us in the arid West, where old, beautiful, deeply-rooted trees dot the landscape around a river, and provide a stark contrast to the dry spaces around it.

There is, on the other hand, the life of a wicked person, who is like a shrub clinging desperately to dry, dusty soil in the middle of the desert. Even if rain comes to this salt covered waste land, it passes this wicked man by, for the water is on its way to the streams that will bless the righteous. This is the life of the person who “trusts in man and makes flesh his strength.” This is the life of self-reliance, the life of the self-made man. This is the life of those who trust in strength and might and human wisdom, either alongside or in place of the wisdom of God.

Jeremiah begins this chapter lamenting the presence of altars to foreign gods in Israel, alongside what everyone assumes to be faithful worship of the God of Israel in the Temple. “So long as we are retaining our regular observance of Temple worship, we can do whatever else we want to do in addition to it,” went the thinking of Israel. Jeremiah reminds them, and us, that following God is a zero-sum game. To say, we owe allegiance to “God and anything else,” or that we trust “God plus something else,” is as good as saying we do not really trust God. Israel cannot rest on their worship of Israel’s God, because it is practiced in addition to the worship of man-made gods and their promises of man-made strength.

Somewhat abruptly, Jeremiah shifts away from this vivid, striking image contrasting two ways of living to say this: “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” Jeremiah knows his audience, he knows his hearers. They are people just like us,

people who consider themselves to be God's people, so he knows exactly what they and we are thinking when we hear about these two ways of living. This abrupt turn in Jeremiah amounts to him saying, "I know you think you know what kind of person you are, and what kind of life you are living, but not so fast." The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. You do not even know who you are. True self-knowledge begins and ends with that confession, that we are so deeply deceived about who we are that we cannot even know ourselves. Gregg Ten Elshof is a Philosopher at Biola University who published a book while I was one of his students called, "I Told Me So: Self-Deception and the Christian Life." The tagline on Amazon still reads, "Think you have deceived yourself? Then this book is for you. Think you have never deceived yourself? Then this book is really for you."

We can today read the trials and interviews of normal, good, church-going German boys and men, men with children and respectable careers, who played active roles in the Holocaust. Each and every one of them had deceived themselves to believe that they were doing the right thing when they did what they did. On a smaller scale, we see the craft and power of self-deception in everyday relationships. Every damaging word and action I have seen in churches was said or done by someone with good intentions, who believed they were doing the right thing. Families divide between people who convince themselves that they are doing the right thing. Self-deception runs deep, it is pervasive. To confess our sin as we do each and every time we worship together is to confess that we are deeply, profoundly deceived about who we really are, and that this is not a status that we somehow graduate from through a certain number of years in the church, ordination, or in any way. To be a human being is to be deceived about who you are.

Jesus amplifies this theme of self-deception found in Jeremiah in his Beatitudes, or the Sermon on the Plain, by challenging our very assumptions of what it means to be blessed. One of the first fruits of the human capacity for self-deception is that we are fundamentally deceived about even our life with God. We think we even know who is blessed by God. Blessed are those who are obviously blessed. Blessed are those who have made good choices. Blessed are those we consider “good Christian men.” Blessed are those with enough money, enough food, who are happy, and who are liked by others. But Jesus echoes Jeremiah in saying, “not so fast.” Do not be deceived. For I tell you, blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who mourn, and those who are mistreated like the prophets of old such as Jeremiah.

We only find these teachings of Jesus in Matthew and Luke’s Gospels, though in different forms. What we call the “Sermon on the Mount,” comes from Matthew’s Gospel, and we call it that because Jesus teaches from the top of a mountain, so that he would be seen and heard by the crowds around him. What we call the “Beatitudes,” or the “Sermon on the Plain,” comes from Luke’s Gospel.

The location of the Beatitudes on a level plain is a significant symbol for Luke. Luke opens our passage by saying, “he came down with them and stood on a level place.” That sentence is a sufficient summary of the entire life of Jesus Christ. Jesus has come to identify with those who he describes as blessed in the Beatitudes. He has come to suffer in solidarity with that rabbel surrounding him because they need healing, they need to hear God, and they need deliverance from demonic oppression. The poor, the hungry, those who suffer, and those who are not loved. Jesus has come to be on the same level as us, in solidarity with humanity, and to redeem humanity as one of us, and alongside us, not from above us. Jesus has come to address our brokenness by literally standing on the same level as us.

The Beatitudes of Luke tend to land harder on us in our predominantly wealthy Western churches than the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew. Where Matthew says “blessed are the poor in spirit, Luke says “blessed are the poor.” Where Matthew says “blessed are those who are hungry for righteousness,” Luke says “blessed are the hungry.” Luke’s Beatitudes are more direct and to the point. There are fewer teachings in the Beatitudes, but a much more expansive reflection on what the Sermon on the Mount refers to as persecution “for righteousness’ sake.” In the Beatitudes, that same lesson is told this way: Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the son of Man, and woe to you when people speak well of you.

What an awkward teaching to preach about in a church. Blessed are you when you realize that speaking God’s word is not going to win you friends. Blessed are you when others hold a low opinion of you because of it. Better yet, blessed are you when the opinions of others hold no sway over you, for the surest sign in the history of God and humanity that God’s message is being preached faithfully is that people are not happy. Now, it is worth remembering that even in Jesus’ ministry, another sign that God’s word was being faithfully preached was that there were healings and transformation; soft hearts and open ears. Animosity alone is not a sign of Jesus’ presence, but do expect push-back for following God and speaking for God, and do not let it define your well-being, because that is a horrible existence.

In the 200’s there was a Christian hermit, who like many others who had become jaded with the absurdity of living as a Christian in his society, who went to live alone in a cave in the desert so that he could pray and study. Like many of these strange figures from early Christian history, an ironic group of followers began to disrupt his silent meditation and prayer, because they wanted to be his disciples.

One day, a young man came to him and asked if this hermit would disciple him, and teach him how to be holy. The holy hermit simply told his visitor to go into a valley with a graveyard, and to spend the next day preaching harsh words of condemnation and judgment to the bones in it. The young man did just that, he shouted and cursed at the bones, and returned the next day to the hermit. The hermit then gave the young man the same assignment, only this time he was to preach words of comfort and flattery to the same bones. The young man did exactly that, he preached kind, flattering, comforting words to the bones. So he returned to the hermit, saying that he had completed his assignment. The hermit asked him, “how did the bones respond when you spoke harshly and critically to them?” The young man said, “they did not respond at all.” The hermit then asked, “how did they respond when you spoke kindly with comforting words to them?” The young man said, “the same thing happened, they did not respond.” The hermit said, “those bones must be very holy.”

Do not equate the Christian life with comfort, with ease, or with popularity; for such is often the reward of the self-sufficient man who clings desperately to dry, barren desert soil. It is entirely possible to deceive ourselves into believing that comfort, ease, and popularity are the signs of God’s blessing on our life. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the hungry. Blessed are those who suffer now. Blessed are those who are not liked.

The 16th Century Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Avila was once traveling between monasteries in a treacherous pass in the Spanish Pyreneese mountain range. Darkness came faster than she expected, and a massive rain storm caught her completely unaware, and blinded her from her path as she was navigating steep, treacherous mountain trails. She looked to the heavens in anger, and shouted at God, “if this is how you treat your friends, it is no wonder that you have so many enemies!”

If this is what God calls “blessed,” it is no wonder that even Christians are not all that interested in being Christians sometimes. If this is what God calls “blessed,” it is no wonder that each and every generation in the church must fight against the false, comfortable definitions of blessing that we put in place of those definitions found in the Beatitudes and found in Jeremiah. If this is what God calls “blessed,” it is no wonder so many Christians cling to Jesus Christ plus something else or someone else. It is no wonder that “God and” something real, something tangible, something better than a crucified God is so often the true object of our worship and desire. We should not deceive ourselves, we do not want the life of blessing Jesus describes in our nature. But some of us know that this life we do not want and do not ask for is indeed the way we come to know Jesus Christ.

If Jesus were here now speaking the Beatitudes to St. Peter’s Anglican Church, perhaps he would say this. Blessed are you who are embarrassed and ashamed by your life choices. Blessed are you who have been hurt by the church. Blessed are you who have had to bury a child. Blessed are you when your body is breaking down as a result of chronic illness. Blessed are you when death is not an abstraction that just happens to other people, like a foxhole in war movies, but a not-very-distant inevitability that you know will happen to you with a fresh certainty. Blessed are you who know what every alcoholic knows is the basis and foundation for every moment of sobriety, that you are completely powerless. We are all completely powerless, so the life of one who clings to the power and wisdom of man is not only dry and barren, but an impossibility.

If we understand life as Jeremiah and the Psalmist do, where we can either live as trees planted by streams of living water of which we are not the source or as self-sufficient shrubs clinging desperately to our ways of life in the desert, we are blessed by our suffering, and our

powerlessness because they uproot us. The vivid imagery of the Psalm and Jeremiah do not describe the result of choices, so much as they describe where we all begin, as shrubs in the desert, clinging desperately to our dry patches of control and power. We must be uprooted from our own little kingdoms of “man and the strength of the flesh,” so that God would situate us near streams of living water. I know that God is nearest to me when I am at wits end. I have experienced the presence of God most acutely with those who are sick, dying, or dead. We all know this, we do not want this for ourselves or those we love, but it is in such places where God is truly found, because Jesus has come to stand on a level place with us in our suffering. That is why God is found in those places.

There has only been one Psalm 1 man in all of history. There has only been one man who is righteous like Jeremiah describes righteousness. There has only been one man who is truly blessed with Beatitude blessedness born through suffering. There is only one who is not deceived about himself. There is only man who knows himself truly. That one man is Jesus Christ. He was the Psalm 1 man deeply rooted near streams of living water. He knew the abundance of God and true blessedness. He left the riches of this living water to live as one of us, a shrub in a desert wasteland. He came to identify with us in our sinful humanity to save us from it. It is only through his power, which we discover at the limits of our own power, that we are planted by streams of living water.

Not only does Jesus Christ know himself perfectly, without deception, and without deceit, he knows you and me in the same way. He is the one “to whom all hearts are open, from whom no secrets are hid.” He knows you better than you know yourself. He also loves us perfectly, without deception, and without deceit. We are fully known and fully loved, “by him, and with him, and in him” who gives himself to us fully, and stands on a level place with us.

To run the risk of repeating myself, it is by him, and with him, and in him alone, exclusively, without addition, that we have any reason to hope. Thanks be to God, he promises to give himself to us always, as we confess our self-deception, our powerlessness, and our desperate need for him, and him alone. We open our hands, our hearts, and our lives to him. Amen.