

6th Sunday after Epiphany
(6th Sunday in Ordinary Time)

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; Luke 6:17-26; I Corinthians 15:12-20

Jeremiah 17:5-10 is a poem that expresses the prophet's perception of both the good and the evil that lies in humanity and in all people. It is built around two assertions made by Jeremiah about humanity. The first, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord" (17:7). The second is, "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it" (17:9)?

The prophet begins, "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. 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" (17:5-6).

Jeremiah begins by declaring that where a person or a society places its trust determines the priorities of that nation or person. If they place their trust in God, they will discover the trustworthiness of God. And that trustworthiness will manifest itself in the repayment of trust by God to that person or nation. If, on the other hand, a person or nation places trust in other centers of power (the nation, the economy, the family, the intellect), they will be separated from relationship with God.

Jeremiah then examines more thoroughly the nation or the individual who places their trust in political, economic or even religious power. Such a people can be likened to a dried-out shrub, barely maintaining their life in a parched and barren wilderness. They are neither able to see what God is about in their society or history, nor can they respond to God's action and embrace it. They simply become a dried-up plant, desperately reaching out its roots for the little moisture that is available.

However, "blessed are those who trust in the Lord – whose trust *is* the Lord!" Jeremiah then examines more thoroughly a person or a people who place their trust in God. "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" (17:7-8). Unlike a "dried-up plant", those whose trust is centered in God are like thriving, growing plants in the midst of abundant water and fertile soil. They will be blessed by God because they are open to be blessed.

Jeremiah then summarizes his argument. "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings" (17:9-10). In the final analysis, Jeremiah states, one must understand that human beings and the societies they create are evil. Although humanity can act in profoundly compassionate ways, given the opportunity they will act evil as well. And this is because, at their very depths, they are perverse. C. S. Lewis, in his science fiction trilogy, refers to us as "the bent ones" (over against his fictional people from Mars who know no sin).

“The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse”. To the people in the Old Testament era, the “heart” is neither the physical organ nor the seat of the emotions (as in American understanding that uses a heart on Valentine’s Day to symbolize love). To the Jews, the heart was the symbol of character – the mind and the will of a person (e.g. Jer. 4:9; Prov. 4:23; 16:23). It is that seat of character that is “desperately corrupt” (RSV).

Actually, Jeremiah wants to state that both the will and the emotions are “bent”. Therefore, in the next statement, he says “I the Lord test the mind (the actual Hebrew word is “kidneys”) and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings”. The kidneys were, to the Hebrews, the seat of the emotions while the heart was the seat of the will. Therefore, by this statement, Jeremiah is declaring that, at our very depths, both humanity as a whole and each individual human being, is oriented to do the evil. This is both a matter of will (our “heart” chooses to do evil) and of our emotions (our “kidneys” drive us to do evil). Jeremiah is articulating that both the conscious decisions and the unconscious drives of humanity move us toward evil actions and destructions; he has grasped the significance of the unconscious!

It is important to recognize that what Jeremiah is writing here about the inevitable evil of human beings is written in the light of what has become the recognition of Judah’s unavoidable drive toward self-annihilation at Babylonia’s hand. This prophet is trying to give a social message as well as a personal one. Jeremiah has continually counseled acceptance of Israel’s inevitable conquest by Babylonia, for this is the certain consequence of Israel’s refusal to follow the Deuteronomic covenant of justice, equitable distribution of wealth and relationship with God (Jer. 27-28). But instead, Judah keeps resisting Babylon, bringing about their assured destruction. Their conscious minds should tell them to compromise, to negotiate, to surrender. Instead, facing impossible odds, they blindly follow policies that guarantee their destruction. Why do they do it? Because “the heart is devious above all else; it is perverse”. And therefore their eventual destruction is assured! Such is the nature of sinful human beings and the societies they build.

Psalm 1 uses the same metaphor as does Jeremiah in describing both individual and corporate good and evil intentions.

“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

“The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (1:1-6).

The Psalm is divided into two parts. The first part is verses 1-3, and deals with the strength, certainty and prosperity of the person who is in and nurtures a strong relationship with God (as epitomized in reflecting and acting upon the Law of Moses). The second part is verses 4-6 and

deals with the wicked person whose existence is superficial, ephemeral and of little lasting value; he is “like chaff that the wind drives away”.

The Psalm reminds us that, although God’s grace is a gift to us, we have the responsibility of maintaining our receptivity to it. The faithful are likened to trees drawing their nourishment from a nearby stream. We “are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season”. So we, as followers of Yahweh, must seek nourishment from God on a continuing basis. We must pay attention to our own spiritual formation. And when we do so and continue to be nourished by a nourishing God, we will have the God-given inner resources that will enable us to be most effectively used by Him in public life.

Luke 6:17-26 is the first part of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Plain” (Luke 6:17-49). Like Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount” (Matt. 5-7), Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain” begins with beatitudes. But how different the beatitudes are that Luke’s Jesus speaks than those spoken by Matthew’s Jesus!

Luke’s Jesus declares, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets” (6:20-21).

The difference between the two sets of beatitudes is striking. That difference is threefold. First, the intent of the beatitudes is entirely different. In Luke, it is the poor, those who weep, and the hungry that are blessed, for it is they who will receive the kingdom of God. In Matthew, it is “the poor in spirit”, “those who mourn” and “those who hunger and thirst after righteousness”. Both sets of beatitudes are in keeping with the respective intent of these gospels. Luke’s Jesus wishes to proclaim jubilee to all Israel, particularly bringing about the liberation of the despised, poor and powerless in their midst. Matthew is concerned about demonstrating that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and is therefore gospel good news to all those in Israel who “thirst after righteousness”.

Second, strategic beatitudes presented in Matthew are eliminated by Luke. “Blessed are the meek”, “blessed are the merciful”, “blessed are the pure in heart”, “blessed are the peacemakers”, “blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” are all missing from Luke’s presentation of the beatitudes. It is as significant that Luke eliminates certain beatitudes as well as changes the others (or is it that Matthew adds to the beatitudes and adapts them to his intent?). All of the beatitudes that are not included in Luke’s account are beatitudes that are not concerned with social transformation but rather the maintenance of a people under the Jewish Law.

Third, Luke contains material that doesn’t appear in Matthew’s account. That material is a series of woes. “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 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. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets” (vss. 24-26). It is as if Luke is saying, “Under no circumstances do I want you to

misunderstand what I am writing. I do not want you to spiritualize the Beatitudes as Matthew has done. I want you to understand that the Gospel has to do with the liberation of those who are the oppressed and marginalized of the world, and does not embrace those who oppress and exploit. In fact, it is precisely those who “keep the Law” in which sin lies, for they have used the Law and seeking for righteousness under that Law who build up their plenty, prestige and power at the expense of the poor. For the very act of oppression drives the kingdom out of a person. One cannot be dominating and be blessed by Jesus’ Gospel!”

Luke’s handling of the Beatitudes is the clearest indication that Luke’s Jesus is committed to the jubilee and its consequent liberation of the poor. The poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, the exploited will be set free by Jesus’ gospel, Luke declares. The rich, the full, the laughing, the oppressors will be brought to judgment. There will be a great reversal, Jesus proclaims in Luke. For the day will come when wealth and food will be redistributed, and those who currently enjoy the bounty of life will be made destitute while those who are now oppressed and exploited will rise to the top – all because the wealthy and powerful would not share their wealth! The first will be last and the last first. The powerful will be brought low and the poor raised up. And such a reversal will happen in society because the rich “did not recognize the time of their visitation from God” (19:44) and take the steps necessary to share their wealth (as did Zacchaeus in 19:1-10), to act justly toward all and to build a relational faith!

Clearly the content of Luke’s beatitudes is consistent with Jesus’ commission in Luke 4:18-19. This opening to Jesus’ “Sermon on the Plain” is the proclaimed reality of Jesus’ mission call. His commission is to bring good news to the poor, to seek the release of the captives, to bring sight to the blind, to work for the liberation of the oppressed and to insist upon the full implementation of jubilee so that wealth is effectively redistributed and poverty eliminated. According to Luke, Jesus’ work was the work of the Messiah reestablishing jubilee throughout Israel and perhaps even the world. And Luke’s beatitudes give testimony to that work!

I Corinthians 15:12-20 continues Paul’s argument regarding resurrection. In 15:1-11, Paul has demonstrated the strategic relationship between belief in Christ and the embracing of his resurrection. Belief in Jesus’ resurrection is essential to faith in Christ. Now, in today’s epistle lesson, Paul expands his argument for Christ’s resurrection to our resurrection.

“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ – whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (15:12-20)!

Paul has earlier demonstrated that 525 people over several years have all witnessed to being with the resurrected Christ (15:1-11). Therefore, Paul argued, we *know* that Jesus rose from the dead

(just ask these eyewitnesses)! Now, Paul takes the next step of logic as he addresses the real issue within the Corinthian Church that must be addressed. “Some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead”. And why do you argue that? You argue that because reason tells you that no one has ever come back from the dead!

Oh, really? Then how do you explain the 525 eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus? You Corinthians don’t deny his resurrection; in fact, you embrace it. Well, if you do assert Christ’s resurrection, you cannot deny the resurrection of those who believe in him.

What Paul is addressing here was his assertion that Jesus’ resurrection could not be separated from the resurrection of those who believe in him. To do so is to assert an unbiblical understanding of the human body (vv. 35-49). If these Corinthian sophists insist that Christians are not resurrected, then logically they cannot argue that Jesus rose from the dead (as long as they perceive Jesus as a human being – which, of course, he was).

To build his case, Paul uses a negative argument that demonstrates the illogical consequences of maintaining their position. If there is no resurrection of the body because human beings don’t come back to life after their death, then Jesus was not raised from the dead. If Jesus was not raised from the dead, then the Christian message that is built upon the authenticity of his resurrection is not true. And if it is not true, then your faith is in vain. If your faith is in vain, then you have believed all this time in a lie, and you have lived your life for no purpose at all.

But one could argue as a pragmatist, “Even if what you believe is a lie, if believing it helps you to live a more fulfilled and purposeful life, then what is the harm of that?” What is the harm of that? Certainly one may have lived a more meaningful life. But that life was built upon a deception! It wasn’t true. And therefore, all in which you trusted was found to be false. That would be the most cruel and greatest of deceptions. “If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (15:19).

But the fact is that “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (15:20). By “first fruits”, Paul is referring to the Israelite practice of bringing an offering to God of the first part of each crop (Lev. 23:10; Deut. 26:1-15). That offering of one’s “first fruits” was associated with Israel’s annual recital of their belief that God had called them out of slavery as a people, had liberated them and had provided for them sustenance for life (Deut. 26:5-10). And it was at the ceremony of the first fruits that both the Israelite nation and each Israelite family acted out their commitment to not only be good stewards of all that God had given them but to use that wealth to create economic equality throughout their nation and to eliminate poverty, as they pledged themselves afresh to their obedience of the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee (Deut. 26:12-14; Lev. 25:18-24).

Thus, Paul argues here, as the first fruits was the offering of the Hebrews that symbolized both who they were as a nation and how they were to act (justly, equitably, relationally), so it is that Jesus’ resurrection is the “first fruits” offering for the Christians. It symbolizes who we are as a people and how we are to act as God’s people. Jesus was “the first to rise from the dead” (Acts 26:23). So we, too, have and will rise! We have already been raised into a new way of life – a life of becoming a new community of reciprocal love (love for one another and for God), the

equitable sharing of wealth (so that there is no poor among us) and working for a world of justice and elimination of poverty. And we will someday rise into eternal life through the One who has given us life – the one who is our first fruits. This is the assurance in which we as Christians live and move and have our being!

Paul's argument here is like Jeremiah's argument in the Old Testament lesson of the 6th Sunday in Epiphany. Jeremiah argued that where a person or a society places its trust determines the priorities of that nation or person. Thus, Paul argues, if you place your trust in the resurrected Jesus, then you have the means to live a loving, just and equitable life and join with those who also work for such a society. But if, on the other hand, you choose to trust in anything other than Jesus' way (that is, allegiance to the nation, the economy, the family or even the intellect in rejecting the reality of resurrection), then you have chosen to be separated from God and the mission in life of working for God's Jubilee!

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