

*“The Good News: Love in a World Turned Upside Down”*

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

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Message for February 13, 2022

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The verses we heard from the Book of Jeremiah outline two ways of living - only two - there is no middle ground. The message is that we can trust in mere flesh, or we can trust in God. We cannot have it both ways. To turn toward something other than God is to turn away from God. We can't face both directions at the same time.

Jeremiah's prophecy concerns the hearts of all in Judah, and not just the hearts and minds of those holding political and religious power. While other prophets may have railed against the structures and systems that represented idolatry and faithlessness, Jeremiah saw the issues of his day in far more personal terms. The problem between God and the chosen people would not be resolved simply in palaces or by armies. Instead, the path to wholeness and to the restoration of a relationship with the holy would begin inside each person - deep down in the heart. Jeremiah said that it was the Lord who would “test the mind and search the heart” (v. 10).

Those who trust in mere mortals are cursed but those who trust in God are blessed. These verses echo Psalm 1, which pronounces blessings on those whose “delight is in Yahweh's law.” The psalmist says that such people “will be like a tree planted by the streams of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also does not wither. Whatever he does shall prosper” (v. 3). “The wicked are not so, but are like the chaff which the wind drives away” (v. 4). “Therefore, the wicked shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For Yahweh knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked shall perish” (vv. 5-6).

Jeremiah says, “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength” - It is not a sin to trust people, but it is a sin to trust in people—

We might be tempted to invest our deepest faith in another person and to derive our dearest hope from that person—to give that person the place in our hearts that rightfully belongs to God.

Or we might be tempted to invest our ultimate trust in an ideology or philosophical system—or the scientific method —or technology—or some get rich scheme.

Or we might be tempted to trust in contractual agreements with other people or treaty agreements with other nations.

Or we might be tempted to trust in our military prowess or that of our allies.

Or we might be tempted to trust in a healthy lifestyle and physical fitness routines. Some people put their ultimate trust in oat bran.

Or we might be tempted to trust in our own wisdom or our own strength or our own resources. The more gifted or wealthy we are, the more this is likely to be our temptation.

Jeremiah reveals to us how to move through change as he stood in the midst of a time of transition. His career as a prophet began in the shadow of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. It ended in a time of exile. Having lost his home along with others when the holy city was conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians, he was finally forced to flee to Egypt, likely against his will, along with others who had attempted to remain.

Jeremiah had seen it all coming and counseled the people to surrender or be destroyed. He went on to preach a different and equally troubling message: exile was to be the new normal. How would the people of God respond? As if they lived in a desert? Or would they be planted in this strange world like trees rooted next to a flowing river? Only one response would indicate faithfulness and trust.

In times of great transition, though, it is not always easy to remain faithful. Jeremiah spoke about those whose hearts would turn away from God. His metaphor for the unfaithful was that they would be like a shrub in the desert, constantly searching for water that could never be found.

You have to wonder if we are not in the same bind, though our problem instead may be the flood of things we own and the abundance of choices we face in daily living.

Even though we live with seeming prosperity, we also live in a world that does not always feel right. It is as though the threat of being an exile hangs over all our heads.

The plight of exiles from war-torn parts of the world is daily news. Those without shelter are exiles in our own cities. The jobless are exiled from employment. To face a serious illness means being exiled from health. None of us is immune from some threat of exile.

The only question for Jeremiah was, which path were the exiles to follow? Living as if life was a desert and therefore a desperate struggle? Or living as if rooted by a flowing river, even through ongoing challenges and transitions?

The Gospel of Luke gives us a story of Jesus speaking directly to the need for change and preaching about how to live into a new world. In what has come to be called the Sermon on the Plain, we hear the call to a radical way of discipleship that turns the way of the world upside down.

Luke does not add the spiritual elements that are found in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Luke is clear that the poor are the blessed group and the rich had better wake up and smell the coffee! The riches that bring you comfort now will not comfort you for long. The satisfaction you now have with life in general will change when we enter into the Kingdom of God.

From the very beginning, Luke removes any notion of status. Jesus comes down from the mountain to a level place, to a place where all can reach him and all can be healed. He is talking to a mixed crowd, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor. Jesus has been healing many people, and now focuses on teaching what it truly means to be a disciple of Christ in a world that has very different values. For Luke, being a disciple means dealing with real socio-economic issues, those issues that cause poverty, hunger, weeping and hatred.

The poor and the hungry know the reality of their situation. They are totally dependent on God; entrusting themselves to God's care and mercy, which is the foundation of grace and a right relationship with God. The rich, on the other hand, are disposed to take comfort in themselves and

their resources, thereby finding it more difficult to trust themselves to the mercy and grace of God.

Richard Rohr observes, “The people on the bottom of the system — any system — are usually much more ready to hear the word of God. Longing and thirsting for righteousness, they are more ready to stop protecting the status quo. Therefore they're much more ready for conversion. They have a head start, a symbolic if not real advantage.

“When you preach to the prisoners, to the financially poor, to those who are not the beneficiaries of the system — then you get a much purer response to the gospel. It is not as likely to be used and abused for the purposes of control and power.

“I think that's why we're only now coming to deal with Jesus' words about war and poverty. As long as we continued to preach the gospel to the people on top, it was used by them merely to support their system and worldview.”

We, who hear the blessings and the woes from this text, those of us who have access to resources, those of us who are comfortable, those of us who are “doing just fine,” realize that we are more like the shrubs in the desert. How might we be like a tree planted by water, sending out our roots by the stream? What status or comfort am I willing to give up and instead, walk alongside others?

Jesus is pointing us to a radical truth - that our human world is set up in ways that push people to the margins. To be in right relationship we are called into deep love. We are called out of exile and into belonging. This is the good news: love in a world turned upside down.