

2.13.2022, Epiphany 6

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

“Blessed are you”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

In today’s gospel, Jesus’ words about “blessings and woes” are difficult words, and yet he is speaking to each of us. When Jesus says, “*Blessed are you*” he is speaking about a way to life with him and together with others. When Jesus says “*Woe to you*” he is speaking of the way that leads away from him to separation from God and from community with others. Human life is about the movement back and forth between “blessings and woes.”

More than ever, we live in a time when it is good to be reminded of a way to life-giving community. We have been, and we continue to be, in exile from one another. We have become suspicious and fearful of genuine human community. For two years, as we have often lived alone, we have also felt the loneliness of the “woes” that Jesus describes.

These past two years have been challenging beyond anything most of us have ever faced. At the beginning of 2020 no one thought that two years later 918,000 people in this country, and at least 5.8 million worldwide, would have perished from COVID-19. In the midst of very challenging times, disunity and our often intentional divisiveness, the temptation to live alone and care only about our own needs leads to Jesus’ words “*Woe to you*” becoming a reality. During these past two years, what has given you hope, enabling you to have resilience and growth? Today’s readings offer us insight into what helps us truly grow and thrive, even in the wilderness.

Today’s psalm and the reading from Jeremiah describe the human journey as a choice between two paths. One path leads to life and the other to separation from life. Psalm 1 describes life with God like this: “*They are like trees planted by streams of water, which bear fruit in its season and their leaves do not wither. In all they do, they prosper.*” The word translated as “prosper” literally means “to advance” or “to rush forward” – meaning that trees planted by water grow and thrive. To prosper with God means we grow outward and upward, thriving and bearing fruit.

These readings describe our lives when we have community with God: we prosper, grow and thrive as human beings. To prosper doesn’t simply mean financial security; but rather, to grow and thrive spiritually so that no matter what happens in life, we remain close to God as the source of life-giving community. Close to God, we never wither or die, rather, we will live into eternity each day.

To say it another way, participation in eternal life begins now and each day as we choose God, life and sacred community. To trust in God is to be like a tree planted by water, never fearing the heat or drought, always bearing fruit, growing and prospering to help others. There is something to learn here, because Jesus is also drawing upon the words of the Psalms, the prophets and all of Hebrew scripture.

After these past two years, I think we can probably identify with the image of living in the parched wilderness. All of us as individuals and as a church have been traveling through the wilderness. Water in the wilderness, however, always gathers community. Water is the difference between life and death. This is what we do on Sunday; we gather together for word and sacrament that offer us life-giving water – a community of grace in the wilderness.

Today's gospel begins with such a scene. Luke tells us that a great multitude of people from all Judea and the coastlands came to hear Jesus, be healed of diseases, and cured of unclean spirits. The presence of Jesus is water in the wilderness. The presence of Jesus makes us "prosper," thrive and grow. Each Sunday, we are called "Blessed," because we come to Jesus hungry to receive the real presence of Jesus in bread and wine – in word, sacrament and community.

Jesus continues to gather us into life-giving community so that we can live for and serve others. In today's gospel Jesus makes it clear that he is concerned about those who are poor and hungry, about those who weep and are excluded from community. Jesus' words "*Blessed are you*" are the core and grace of the gospel.

The word translated as "Blessed" is the Greek word "*makarios*" which literally means "to be made large." *Blessed are you* means that, with God, we become "larger," we grow and thrive because God extends God's benefits and grace to us. We become like trees planted by water that prosper, grow and thrive. *Blessed are you* means to grow and extend upward and outward toward God's community with others. Growth with God always results in community. Growth in God is never about a solitary or lonely life.

That is what Jesus' words "*Woe to you*" are all about. To live without God, and without God's life-giving community, ends in separation from God. For example, "*Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation*" reminds us that simply being rich in possessions is a dead end. Notice that Jesus says riches are given as a "consolation," not as a blessing. Let's think about the word translated as "consolation." In Greek it is "*paraklesis*" and could really also be translated as "encouragement" or "incentive." Jesus is pointing out that riches and possessions are given as an "encouragement" or "incentive" from God to be used for others, not simply to use for ourselves.

If the word “*paraklesis*” sounds familiar it is because it is related to the word for the Holy Spirit, “*The Paraclete*” – the one who consoles, comforts and encourages.

Jesus’ words “*Woe to you*” remind us that to live only for our riches is to miss the point of having riches. The Holy Spirit is encouraging and consoling us so that we might console and help others. The same goes for being full and ignoring the hungry, laughing and ignoring those who suffer, and for enjoying acceptance while others are hated and excluded. When we do not act to help others, Jesus says, “*Woe to you.*”

Jesus’ words are revolutionary. Jesus’ words are a challenge to people who live in an incredibly wealthy society constantly told that we need more in order to thrive and grow. Jesus tells us quite the opposite. We are called “Blessed” when we realize our own poverty and our need of God. Jesus calls the poor and all in need “Blessed” because God cares for those in need. Only living for God and others leads us out of the wilderness and into God’s life-giving community. Living only for our own advancement leads to separation from God and life-giving community.

I am always encouraged when I see our young people learning early in life to help others who are poor, hungry, weeping and excluded. Today’s “Souper Bowl of Caring” is one way that our young people are encouraging us to use our riches to help fight hunger in our community. I am encouraged by our young people who understand that we are to use our gifts for others.

There is a quote attributed to John Wesley that I discovered when I was young: “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.” What has stayed with me about these words attributed to Wesley is doing good “in all the ways you can” and “as long as ever you can.” To move from “Woes” to “Blessing” means seeking to do good for others “as long as ever you can.”

This is how we live into eternity with God and with others. Jesus’ words are revolutionary because they are filled with grace. Jesus is calling us to community with God and with others so that God might encourage others through each of our lives.

The world will never tell us that the secret to growing and thriving is to give our riches away, doing good “as long as ever you can.” Life comes down to two paths: a path of life with God, and a path of separation from God.

At the end of our lives, all that will matter is how we have loved God and loved our neighbor. We move from woes to blessing when we open our hands, using our riches to encourage and help others. Amen.