

February 17, 2019
New Song Episcopal Church
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(All lectionary passages are included below the sermon text.)

Blessings and Curses

Sometimes the Bible is quite clear. Sometimes not so much. One thing we know, however, is that it has a message of good for those who do good and a message of trouble for those who do bad.

“Blessed are those who...”

“Cursed are those who...”

Today’s readings are replete with instructions accompanied by either positive or negative consequences.

I kind of feel like all humans start off life with an inherent sense of right and wrong, of good and bad. Some things must be taught, like “Don’t hit your brother,” but when we are the ones being hit, we understand the unfairness and know what happened to us was wrong.

Looking at the passage in Jeremiah, I wonder if it is pointing this out in its dichotomy of “trust in mere mortals” vs “trust in the Lord.” This passage does not make it perfectly clear what it means to do either, except that trusting in the Lord involves going beyond ourselves, beyond mere flesh, beyond our devious hearts, and learning to do what is right.

Perhaps those negatives are all the things we do when we are the ones hitting our brother, literally or metaphorically, and the positives are when we listen to the voice we call our conscience that tells us acts like this are wrong. Trusting in the Lord then would be listening to the voice that tells us that others are valuable and should be treated well.

It is in these extremes that two fates are mentioned: be like a parched shrub in the desert or flourish like a tree planted by water. If you do good, good will come to you and you will be taken care of. Today's Psalm supports this message and states it with greater strength.

Reading these two passages reminded me of Romans chapter 2. In it we hear things like every one of you who judges another condemns yourself because you do the same things. Paul continues with God will repay each person according to what he has done. But, the verse that leapt to my memory first was later in the chapter. Verse 15 says that people who do good show that they have the requirements of the law written on their hearts. There is a point where the law is unnecessary because a person is striving for what is right and in their striving and doing good, they fulfill the law whether they know the specifics of the law or not.

Jeremiah: "I the Lord test the mind and search the heart..."

This leads us to Christ. To the Beatitudes. To the resurrection.

Who among us has not given in to selfishness, to greed or gluttony, to hatred?

The first time for any of us was while we were still children. We are the ones who hit our brother, who took away someone else's toy, or sneered at the child who was different. Others around us tried to teach us how to listen to the still, small voice inside telling us what is right and what is wrong. Maybe we started to learn by being taken aside when we were wronged and kindly reminded that we did something similar not that long ago...and we started to realize that we don't want to make anyone feel what we felt in that moment.

It is in these moments that the good within us that was perishing as we listened to our flesh, to our selfishness, instead begins to come alive. Resurrections are real. To be one who listens more frequently to the way of the wicked is to pursue death. To repent and choose to listen and train ourselves to follow the way of love is live, even for the most vile and heinous person.

Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor...who are hungry now...who weep now..." WHY?! Because when you have been through such pain and difficulty, your spirit is awakened to realize the need to help others. Did you know that typically the most generous people are consistently also the least wealthy? They give because they know what it feels like to be without.

It is our pain that opens us up to the need for love. When we embrace that love, we flourish and discover ways to help those around us also flourish. In the year of drought, we are not anxious, because by faith we know how our needs are supplied. We

do not fear when the heat comes, for we know our leaves will stay green. Everything we do will prosper if only we persist on the righteous path.

Then we read, “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.” And suddenly, I am back to my opening sentences:

Sometimes the Bible is quite clear. Sometimes not so much. One thing we know, however, is that it has a message of good for those who do good and a message of trouble for those who do bad.

I believe in love. I believe in hope. I believe in transformation. I believe in resurrection. I don't always understand how things work. If I did, maybe faith would have no meaning.

Amen.

The Old Testament: Jeremiah 17:5-10

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.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.

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.

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.

The Psalm: 1

Beatus vir qui non abiit

- 1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, *
 nor lingered in the way of sinners,
 nor sat in the seats of the scornful!
- 2 Their delight is in the law of the Lord, *
 and they meditate on his law day and night.
- 3 They are like trees planted by streams of water,
 bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; *
 everything they do shall prosper.
- 4 It is not so with the wicked; *
 they are like chaff which the wind blows away.
- 5 Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes, *
 nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.
- 6 For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, *
 but the way of the wicked is doomed.

The New Testament: 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

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.

The Gospel: Luke 6:17-26

Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“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.”

"But 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."