

The Kingdom Gap

6 Epiphany C

Feb. 13, 2022

Rev. Dr. David Gardner Tweed

First Reading: Jeremiah 17:5-10

These verses compose a poem that is part of a larger collection of wisdom sayings that contrast two ways of life. Life with God brings blessing; the power and vitality of God is active in our life. Life without God brings a curse, the power of death.

⁵Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord.

⁶They 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. ⁷Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. ⁸They 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. ⁹The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it? ¹⁰I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

Gospel: Luke 6:17-26

After choosing his twelve apostles, Jesus teaches a crowd of followers about the nature and demands of discipleship. He begins his great sermon with surprising statements about who is truly blessed in the eyes of God.

¹⁷Jesus came down with the twelve 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. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. ²⁰Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the dominion of God. ²¹“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²²“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son-of-Man. ²³Rejoice 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. ²⁴“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵“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. ²⁶“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

Introduction

Blessings and curses abound on the 6th Sunday after Epiphany. We would do well to listen closely to whom the “blessed are” and the “woe to” are directed and to find our place in the crowd among those who desire to touch Jesus. The risen Christ stands among us in the mystery of the holy supper with an invitation to live in him, and offers power to heal us all.

Overview

A fundamental decision is placed before us this day: Will we choose the way of blessing or the way of woe? The death and resurrection of Jesus is the pivot on which the decision turns. To be in Christ means that we get planted by streams of water and are rooted among those who thirst for God’s reign. The mystery of our faith points the path to life: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

6th Sunday after the Epiphany

The metaphors of the fruitful trees or the chaff make it easy for Christians either to overstress active discipleship, as if salvation requires radically altered behavior, or to spiritualize such language, as if one’s interior feelings are all that matter. Can both be equally true?

Experiential Idea

Jeremiah 17:5-10 and Psalm 1 depict images of trees planted by streams of water. The roots receive the nutrients they need, helping the trees remain strong and steady in difficult times. We too live in anxious and uncertain times. What practices of faith keep us rooted? Consider inviting worshipers to share about spiritual practices that have kept them grounded in times of trouble. Perhaps there can even be an opportunity to incorporate some of these practices into the service.

Website

The website inequality.org has been tracking inequality-related news and views for nearly two decades. A project of the Institute for Policy Studies since 2011, the site offers graphics, statistics, and research-based commentaries about economic inequality around the world. Subtopics include race, gender, health, the care economy, and Covid-19. The website also includes information about think tanks, academic centers, public interest groups, and projects happening around the world to combat the

effects of wealth inequality. Worship planners might consider lifting up current research on economic inequality as we wonder what Jesus' words in Luke mean for us today.

Theological Reflection

Today's texts offer multiple opportunities to make connections to the sacraments. Water imagery abounds in today's Psalm and reading from Jeremiah. Like the water that nourishes a tree to bear fruit, the waters of baptism unite us with Christ and one another, empowering us to live out our call as Christians today, bearing fruit of compassion and justice in our world. Similarly, we are fed and nourished at the table at the Lord's supper and sent forth to live lives of faithful service to our neighbors in need.

Let the Children Come

Here is what the world says: It is better to be rich than poor; powerful than weak; able-bodied than disabled. It is better to be a man than a woman; white than Black or brown. Here is what God says: *The world is wrong*. Kids learn the oppressive order of the world—greed/classism, racism, sexism, ableism—by a very young age. They don't have to be explicitly taught this oppressive order to experience and learn it. They do need to be explicitly taught God's liberating order of love for creation, which is proclaimed especially in today's Lukan beatitudes. Resources for addressing racism and celebrating diversity with kids can be found here: pbs.org/parents/talking-about-racism.

Connections with Creation

We are in the midst of the world's 6th extinction event, and because of the relentless burning of fossil fuels, our planet keeps breaking records for heat. In these precarious times, many of us feel stressed out, numb, or scared. Today's readings provide a beautiful image for spiritual resilience: trees. Books like *The Hidden Life of Trees* tell us that trees' root systems communicate with each other, sharing resources and information. That's true for us too. Sinking roots deep into the love of God, we discover that everything is connected. Tapping into our God-given belovedness, we receive fresh energy for life. Up we rise like trees, offering our gifts to each other and the world: a kind word or action, our resolve to take part in the healing of creation.

Luke 6:17-26

Luke's masterful rhetorical technique is evidenced in the parallelisms of Woes he has added to four of the Blesseds of Matthew 5: poor (v. 20) and rich (24), hungry (21) and full (25), weep (21) and laugh (25), hate (22) and speak well (26). The omitted Blesseds are elsewhere in Luke. Luke situates the Beatitudes, not on Matthew's mountain for church leaders, but on a plain, accessible to the crowds: Matthew's "the

poor” becomes “you poor.” The poor and needy whom Jesus heals (vv. 18-19) are those he addresses with eschatological hope. The Greek *makarioi* (blessed) is a congratulatory exclamation. Luke understands that Jesus’ followers must expect to be rejected, as was Jesus. Usually Luke describes Jesus as the forgiving Savior of all and God as merciful without bounds, but in this passage Luke is uncharacteristically harsh: God brings healing and all the gifts of salvation to the poor, the hungry, the persecuted. Yet many of the people worshiping in our churches are not these dispossessed persons. The gospel is proclaimed within a service in which we confess our sins of disregard for the poor and at which we are offered food that fills us with Christ. Jesus has ascended a mountain to pray. While there, he has chosen twelve of his disciples, his followers, to be apostles. Now he descends part-way, to a “level place”. There he finds other followers and many others, from Israel and beyond (“Tyre and Sidon”, v. [17](#)). Many are healed, both of known “diseases” (v. [18](#)) and of *being possessed*. Evil “spirits” made them ritually “unclean” so they were not permitted to share in corporate worship of God. Luke tells us of 4 *beatitudes* (vv. [20-22](#)) and corresponding woes or warnings of deprivation in the age to come. Some are “blessed” (happy) by being included in the Kingdom Jesus brings. The warnings are prophecies, cautions. The pairs are: the “poor” (v. [20](#)) and the “rich” (v. [24](#)); the “hungry” (v. [21a](#)) and the “full” (v. [25a](#)); the sorrowful (v. [21b](#)) and the joyous (v. [25b](#)); and the persecuted (v. [22](#)) and the popular (v. [26](#)). The “poor” (v. [20](#)) are those who acknowledge their dependence on God; the “rich” (v. [24](#)) do not want to commit themselves to Jesus and the Kingdom; they are comfortable with the existence they have now. The Greek word translated “consolation” (v. [24](#)) is a financial term: the “rich” do not realize what they owe to Jesus. The “hungry” (v. [25](#)) hunger for the word of God, the good news; the “full” are the materially satisfied. In v. [22](#), “exclude” means socially ostracized and excluded from the synagogue and Temple. The “Son of Man” has a corporate sense: it includes Jesus and his followers: they will be persecuted, as Israel (“their ancestors”, v. [23](#)) persecuted Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Amos, but “in that day” (at the end of the era), they will be rewarded. Jeremiah [5:31](#) says that people spoke well of “false prophets” (v. [26](#)).

What God is bringing! Misery or Meaningfulness?

One danger of these words is to imply that it is better to be poor, hungry, and the like than to be rich, well-fed, and the like. Does God only love us when we are miserable? That is not the brunt of these words. They are promises to those who are suffering in this world that God still sees them, loves them, and is intent on their thriving. Jesus’ words are also warning calls to his hearers that they are called to live with attention and generosity toward their neighbors, even as God is attentive and generous. God is creating a realm, bringing it to life among us by that same power that emanated from Jesus, in which no one is hungry or mourning or poor or disregarded at the very same

time that others are abundantly well-fed, rich, laughing, and respected. It's the contemporaneity of these two opposite circumstances that God promises to remedy, and we are called to address in our own lives.

The Illusion of Dependence on Yourself

Jesus turned the standards of the world around and pointed out the illusion of dependence on ourselves. These are the opposite of the joys of depending on God. He spoke about this using the word woe. Woe is not a threat but an expression of regret and compassion. Jesus regretted the situation when people depended on themselves instead of God. Those who are rich now have been paid in full. They have nothing to look forward to. They do not depend on God. The well-fed now will go hungry in the age to come. They have no compassion now and will be shown none later. Those who laugh now are people of carefree, shallow merriment. They care nothing about others but only about their own amusement. They will weep in the age to come. And those who are spoken well of now had to sacrifice their principles somewhere along the line. People with strong principles are not liked by everyone.

[Jeremiah 17:5-10](#)

Much of the book of Jeremiah records the adventures and sermons of Jeremiah, who from about 626–586 bce urged the Israelites to return to faithful obedience to the covenant in order to avoid divine punishment and political defeat. The literary passage of curses and blessings has close parallels in the aphorisms of later Wisdom literature, while attention to the human heart (vv. 9-10) is characteristic of the prophets, who call for more than exterior adherence to the law. This passage is set next to Luke 6 as another biblical example of the rhetorical pattern of Yes and No. Christians understand that the water that nourishes us is baptism, and the tree is the cross. The passage is similar to much Christian ethics in that it focuses not only on deeds, but also on the intentions of the heart.

Images in the Readings

Luke, like Mark before him, writes of Jesus' **power** going out from him to heal those who touched him. The Christian practice of the laying on of hands enacts this ancient idea that goodness—indeed, also evil—is contagious and can be transferred from one person to another. During the exchange of peace, we participate in a similar transfer of power from one en-Spirited believer to another. Throughout the Bible, God cares for the **poor**—that is, those who are genuinely in dire need of food, healing, and a respected life and livelihood. Is it acceptable when those of us who are not poor

spiritualize this language? Perhaps if God blesses the poor, we all had better be standing close to them so as to receive the happiness to which Luke refers. To the extent that the term “**resurrection**” suggests only a resuscitated corpse, our language is inadequate to express the Christian hope for a new creation. Even Paul uses odd expressions like “first fruits” and “a spiritual body.” Each Sunday we celebrate something we cannot articulate: that everything that is will be brought to newness in God.

Comments from the Cloud of Witnesses

What Luke says to us describes precisely the scandal in which the present church is involved: the great scandal among us is the intercommunion of rich Christians who remain rich and poor Christians who remain poor while celebrating the same eucharist, taking no notice of the Christian model of sharing possessions, the sharing of the one cup of salvation among one another. For this salvation also has social and economic consequences. Everyone, not just an elite group, has to be full enough to be able to laugh because salvation has happened to him or her. God wants life, and life in abundance, for all, not simply for one-third, of the world’s population. What about our abundance? That is Luke’s critical question, a concrete challenge to all of us, here and now. [Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., in *Homilies for the Christian People*, 159-60.]

(Thanks to Sundays&Seasons.com; WorkingPreacher.org; montreal.anglican.org; also attached, “The Year in Inequality in 10 Charts” from Inequality.org)