

**"Blessed are...."**  
**A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston**  
**Thomaston, Maine**  
**Sunday, March 3, 2019**  
**Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**  
**Jeremiah 17:5-10 & Luke 6:17-26**

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.

Jeremiah 17:5-10

He [Jesus] came down with them 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."

Luke 6:17-26

Will you pray with me. Eternal God, be with us in the coming moments as we do our best to ponder the holy words of our sacred ancestors. Help us to find a blessing from you in their message to us this day. Amen.

Here's the bottom line for today -- what goes around comes around. That's a mantra I try to live by -- in my personal life and in what I observe of other people's actions. The prophet Jeremiah and Jesus proclaimed the same, each in their own way -- what goes around comes around. If what we do and all we say comes from a place of goodness and justice and love, we will be blessed. If what we do and all we say comes from a place of hubris and haughtiness, a place of privilege and pride, we will not be blessed.

But what does it mean to be blessed, really?

We say "bless you" to someone when they sneeze.

"Bless you," we say to a person when they have done something nice for us.

We say "what a blessing" when the storm passes us by, or when the sick baby lives or the oldster among us recovers from a fall or pneumonia. We bless others, and sometimes they bless us.

In the late first century, blessings were hard to come by for those early Christians living in a Roman world. They were forced to put their faith to the ultimate endurance test. They were not free to worship God as they chose. They were supposed to worship the Roman emperor. Within their Christian community, immorality and apathy weakened their hearts and their commitment to God. From without, their refusal to practice idolatry often led to martyrdom. It's all told in story form in the Bible.

Into this world stepped the writer of the Gospel of Luke. He wrote what has been called "the most beautiful book in the world," to explain and proclaim the universal significance of the life and death of someone who would come to make a difference for all time. As with the other Gospel writers, Luke had his own point of view and a particular audience in mind when he put his story together. Luke was a Gentile, like us!, writing for Gentiles. He was most likely the only Gentile author in the New Testament.

The authors of the Gospels were not neutral in their interpretations of what they had seen and heard of Jesus' life and death. They were not writing newspaper accounts. They were not writing historical reports. They wrote down their stories in order to make a difference in the lives of those early Christians who heard their words. Jesus made a difference then. The question for us is this -- Does Jesus still make a difference?

Our scripture reading from the Gospel of Luke relates "The Sermon on the Plain," as it is commonly called. "He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of the people..." (Lk 6:17) The corollary to Luke's "Sermon on the Plain" is the longer "Sermon on the Mount," described in the Gospel of Matthew. It was preached from "up on a mountain" where "his [Jesus'] disciples came to him." (Matt 5:1) The "Sermon" Luke describes is shorter than Matthew's. It has fewer teachings and its beatitudes, its blessings, are written in the second person -- "Blessed are YOU poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." (Lk 6:20) rather than in the third person -- "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," as Matthew writes (Matt 5:3)

Three points stand out to me as I reflect on all of this. First, Luke speaks of Jesus delivering the blessings while he stands *among* the people -- his disciples and a great multitude of people. Matthew positions Jesus up on a mountain *with only his immediate disciples near by*.

Second, Luke speaks of Jesus referring to the *literal poor*. Matthew speaks of Jesus referring to the poor *"in spirit."*

Third, Luke speaks of Jesus talking directly *to* the people -- you poor, you who are hungry, you who weep now. (Lk 6:20-21) Matthew speaks of Jesus talking *of* others -- the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and search for righteousness. (Matt 5:3-6)

Do these points make a difference? The difference, to me, is the type of relationship implied in each account. Jesus preached of relationships. He taught of justice and fairness for all. Luke tells us that Jesus stated in the "Sermon on the Plain"

that he supported people in their suffering, all kinds of suffering, and encouraged them to "hang on," for they would receive the kingdom of God. They would be filled and they would laugh. Matthew tells us that Jesus described in the "Sermon on the Plain" the ideal character of a disciple.

Both messages are important. We need to hear them both. We need to hear the *intimacy* of the personal message of Jesus to those who were suffering AND the *proclamation* of what it meant to lead a "disciplined," faithful life. *A gift and a responsibility are implied.*

WE suffer and search for discipline in our personal lives. But we also have much, sometimes too much as Americans, to be thankful for. Sometimes we hide from the responsibility and the relationship we all bear towards one another as children of God. This is why we so often pray together a prayer of confession in our worship services.

Blessedness comes in many forms. It has a long and varied history in the Bible beginning with Genesis when God blesses Abraham. (Gen 1:1-3) I won't go through all the blessings in scripture.... it's supposed to start snowing later today!

The words preserved on the oldest scrap of scripture we have are the familiar words of the blessing of Aaron in the Book of Numbers which begin, in Hebrew, "*Ye va re ka adoni vi yish mer a kah.*" "May the Lord bless you and keep you." (Num 6:24) This blessing of Aaron was found not long ago on a piece of silver in a tomb, just south of Jerusalem, that dates from about 600 BCE. That's approximately 2,600 years ago.

The prophet Jeremiah says to us in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.... 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." (Jer 17:7-8, 10) To trust in God is to be blessed, Jeremiah says....

What are we to make of the blessings and woes proclaimed by our sacred ancestors? How do we interpret them for our lives? In this early 21st century, we may be blessed with good health, good looks, money, a nice home, a decent job. Or, we may not be blessed with these things. In either case, God delivers us a blessing if only we practice our faith in God with our words and our actions. "What goes around comes around," again and again, later, if not sooner....

To be blessed by God is to feel comforted by the faith that God is with us in our daily lives.

To be blessed by God is to know in our hearts that we have a place in God's dominion, both now and in the future.

To be blessed by God is to acknowledge that the relationship we have with God and with one another are the most fragile and consequential bonds of our lives.

Beyond their individual words, the beatitudes -- the blessings -- of Luke's Sermon on the Plain, remind us of the *power* of blessing and being blessed. It is easy to forget that God's promise to bless Abram, and that Jeremiah's confidence in trusting God are carried forward in the words of comfort which Jesus brought to his first followers, and to us, on the way. "*Ye va re ka adoni vi yish mer a kah.*" May God bless you and keep you this day. Let the people say, "Amen."