

Who Do You Trust?

Our Old Testament passage this morning is part of the great Wisdom tradition of Israel; that is, the idea that true wisdom, happiness and riches come from God and from a proper relationship with God. Our Call to Worship this morning was based on Psalm 1, another beautiful example of this great Jewish tradition. The New Revised Standard Version of that short Psalm points out clearly the difference for those who focus their lives on God and those who do not:

¹Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;

²but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.

³They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

⁴The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

⁶for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

For Jeremiah, the key is trust in the Lord; for the Psalmist, it is righteousness. Jeremiah's cursed are those who rely on themselves and on human capabilities, while the wicked decry by the Psalmist are those who transgress and ridicule the law. The Psalmist, clearly, is talking about actions taken and words spoken while Jeremiah is talking about the attitudes that lead to those words and deeds. The message is the same: if one honors God in thought, word and deed, blessings will come. If not, beware!

It is an easy step, then, for those who seek to follow the Wisdom of God to expect that physical blessings will accrue to them as a result of their piety. And, it is just as easy to assume that those who must struggle in life with poverty and misfortune have in some way fallen short of God's mark. To be poor looks very much like being cursed. To think otherwise seems somehow suspect, almost blasphemous. These verses put me in mind of that delightful musical adaptation of Sholom Aleichem's tales of life in a Russian Jewish *shtetl*, Fiddler on the Roof. At one point, the young firebrand revolutionary, Perchik, remarks to Tevye, "Money is the world's curse." "May the Lord smite me with it," responds Tevye, "and may I never recover!" Later in the play, Tevye sings his prayer to God, "If I Were a Rich Man." His motivations as revealed in the song are interesting. Yes, he'd like a bigger house and servants, but that's mostly to please his wife, Golde. What Tevye really wants, just like the blessed in Psalm 1, is time to sit and pray and to study God's law all day long. "That," he sings, "would be the sweetest thing of all."

So far, so good. Right relationship with God equals blessing equals riches and life like a tree beside a stream. Failure to honor God in thought, word and deed equals judgment and life like a shrub in the desert. But the Gospel reading for this morning gives us a very different approach. Jesus, whom we celebrate as the Word, the $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$, the Wisdom of God made flesh, who exhibits the healing power of God to Jews and Gentiles alike, has this to say: Blessed are you who are poor... Woe to you who are rich. Blessed are you who are hungry... Woe to you who are full. Blessed are you who are excluded and woe to you who have good reputations. Jesus is turning the expectations of his audience upside-down! It's more of that same revolutionary talk that got him run out of his hometown for preaching on good news to the poor, regardless of their national origin. It's more of that upside-down nonsense he must have learned from his mother – you remember, Mary who sang "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

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It would seem at first glance that Jesus is contradicting the great Wisdom tradition but I would suggest that he's actually perfectly in harmony with it. First of all, Jesus understands that external circumstances do not, as so many would believe, reflect inner life. The vision of Jeremiah promises freedom from anxiety for those who trust in God – an internal manifestation of God's blessing. The promise of the Psalm, that the righteous shall prosper, does not automatically equal riches in the way that the world thinks of riches. There are things far more important than physical wealth and the acclaim of others, as Jesus reminds us. Jesus is also pointing to another truth revealed in the Old Testament – sometimes adversity can lead us to truth in a way that prosperity cannot. Deuteronomy 8:3 says, “[Yahweh] humbled you [people of Israel] by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” Sometimes, we must be reminded that our resources and strengths are insufficient. In his comments on these lectionary passages, Anthony Robinson remarks, “The bottom line issue running through all three texts is, ‘Where does our trust lie?’ In ourselves or in the Lord? Before you answer, remember Jeremiah's caution, ‘the heart is deceitful in all things.’” Robinson closes his meditation with the words of the ancient prayer: “Christ have mercy upon us. Lord have mercy upon us. Christ have mercy upon us.”

We are indeed in need of Christ's mercy for our hearts do often follow deception. We are too easily caught up in things, too gullible to what the Lutheran scholar, Ann Svennungsen, says is the lie of our culture that, “(We) are just one purchase away from true happiness.” Sometimes, like the Children of Israel, we need to be freed from our possessions and our places of power to be reminded to trust in God. The Rev. Ken Kesselus writes, “(Jesus) knew that purchasing material possessions, and buying insurance, and setting aside savings for retirement or rainy days would lead us to imagine ourselves as safe and secure and in control of our lives. He knew that people like us stand constantly in danger of assuming, consciously or subconsciously, that we can work our way into happiness or buy our way into joy and peace. It is far too easy for us to believe we are powerful enough or independent enough to provide everything we could ever need. With the kinds of resources and abilities most of us have, we are in danger of forgetting that we need anything – especially a savior.”

This is not to say that being poor is something to be sought. Jesus, after all, was not talking about the common poverty that all of the peasants in his lifetime shared but the absolute poverty of those with no resources and no family, who must beg for a living. I see those people every week here at Good Shepherd as they come for the small handouts we can afford to give out of our Benevolence Fund. It's true that some of them have learned to trust in God to keep them alive but it's also true that some of them are in despair and come to me for counsel as much as for food. One man who has seemed on the brink of escaping homelessness for some months now only to suffer setback after setback has begun in recent visits to speak of suicide and looks to us for hope to go on with his life. The desperately poor are no more automatically cognizant of the love of God than are the well-to-do. And, it is possible to have possessions without being a slave to them.

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One way to reconcile all of these conflicting ideas about poverty and wealth and blessing and woes is to view our scriptures this morning through the lens of Epiphany – the season of light in which we celebrate the revelation of the person and mission of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with Us. James Liggett writes, “the beatitudes shine light, but they really don't shine any light about the way the world works. They are not about the world... The beatitudes are about God, they are about who God is, and whom God blesses, and what the kingdom of God is like. They tell us what matters to God, they tell us who is especially important to God, and they tell us what God pays attention to.” In other words, Jesus is reminding us that God especially looks out for the poor. Why? Because so often, no one else will. Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest often called the founder of Liberation Theology has written, “God has a preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God’s will. The ultimate basis for the privileged position of the poor is not in the poor themselves but in God, in the gratuitousness and universality of God’s agapeic love.”

God’s love, freely given and overflowing, is what brings us to this place this morning. We gather each week to celebrate our place in God’s love, the love that heals us and binds us together, and to remember on the Lord’s Day, the ultimate expression of God’s love – the resurrection of the Crucified Christ. The epistle passage in this morning’s lectionary is from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 12-20: “¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵We 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. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” Trust in God’s love, is what Paul is saying, God’s loving power can do anything and we will not be forgotten or abandoned, even to death. We are the Easter people, the Body of Christ, charged to carry on Jesus’ mission of taking good news and healing, food and shelter, to all who need it.

It’s not, as one of my seminary professors often pointed out, simply a matter of standing on a city street corner and saying to bedraggled passers-by, “Go in peace, be warm and filled.” To be the Easter people, the resurrection people, we must make the beatitudes, the priorities of God, our priorities. If we take seriously God’s care for the poor, then we must care for the poor as well. The bioethicist Sondra Ely Wheeler presents four questions she calls key for “Christians who seek to live faithfully within an affluent society.” “Do we...find ourselves at liberty to hear God’s call to us, whatever it is, or are we too encumbered by the things we own – or the things we desire? On what basis do we make decisions about where we work, where we live, and what we do with our time? What do these decisions reveal about the central values of our lives, and how do they contribute to reinforcing them? To what extent does our material prosperity rest upon and help to perpetuate unjust structures and institutions? Can we...justify the present allocation of our material resources in light of the needs of those we call sisters and brothers?”

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We have a unique opportunity as a gathered company of Easter people to put the priorities of God's love into action. We have a choice to make today about how to allocate our material resources in light of the needs of our sisters and brothers in this community. After we close our worship service and convene our business meeting we will be considering some issues related to our proposed senior housing project. I think it's important that we understand that we are taking some risks in proceeding with this project. If we give over half of our land to this project and continue our plans for the development of more gardens on our campus, it is entirely likely that we will never have a magnificent and impressive sanctuary on this site. Our brothers and sisters down the street at Trinity Lutheran will have a far more elegant building than we ever will. Indeed, it's even possible that our little building will seem even more obscure than it is now, as the proposed housing will prevent drivers from the west from seeing us until a second or two later than they do now. We've already experienced opposition and anger from some of our neighbors over our plans and it's likely we will feel more. We are not going to be universally popular. If we accept the plans worked out by our partners at American Baptist Homes of the West and the developer and architects hired by them, we risk all these things. I believe we should take that risk, because we are the Easter people. I believe that we should risk something big for something good. I believe that we should make God's priority our own, that we should see the needs of the elderly poor in our community as far more important than any desire we may have to be a big church with a grand edifice. I believe we have an obligation to use the land, the building, all that we hold in trust from God as a church and as individuals, to serve God's purposes and God's people. I believe we have a calling to trust in God to prosper our desires when we follow the heart of God.

We are the Easter people. The power that flows out of Jesus has touched us and healed us and dwells within us, empowering us to be poor in the eyes of the world, empowering us to love one another and all who come our way, empowering us to proclaim with glad hearts and voices that even when our path leads through deep waters and trials and tough times, we are filled with and by the love of Jesus. We are the Easter people, we are the trees planted by living water, the perversity of our hearts is being changed day by day thanks to that living water into the purity of heart for which we pray. We are the Easter people, we are blessed by God, for we have felt the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord and it is that love that keeps us singing as we go.