

Trust in Difficult Times

Jeremiah 17:5-10 Luke 6:17-26
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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You've probably heard the term, the Sermon on the Mount. Well, that's from the Gospel of Matthew. We have just heard its counterpart in the Gospel of Luke. An important difference, however, is that Luke places this story not on a mountain, but down on a level place, thus his less-familiar version is known as the Sermon on the Plain. But this is not a case of which one got it wrong. Nor is it a case of two separate events. Rather, it's about the different theological perspective of each gospel writer.

Theologically, a **mountain** is often used metaphorically to represent the place where God is encountered and the law is given, like from the story of Moses. This is Matthew's overarching perspective of Jesus' identity. Theologically, a **level plain** is often used metaphorically to represent the real daily life of human existence. It's the place where people struggle to live and where actual ministry takes place among the people. This is Luke's overarching perspective of Jesus' identity.

Yet, both begin with a list of blessings. The English word '**blessed**' comes from the translation of the Latin word *beatitudo*, another term you have probably heard from time to time. And while Matthew lists eight blessings, Luke presents only four, following them with a list of four corresponding and parallel woes, a nice way to say, "Cursed are those who..."

Most biblical scholars believe that Luke followed a pattern found in the Book of Jeremiah from the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament. Jeremiah, as we are about to hear, begins with a word about those who are cursed, followed by those who are blessed.

Hear, now, Jeremiah 17:5-10.

Jeremiah 17:5-10

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.

⁸ 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.

⁹ The heart is devious above all else;
 it is perverse—
 who can understand it?

¹⁰ 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.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of this word.

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Let's start by taking a look at how blessings were used in a different manner in these particular Old and New Testament readings. In both the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus uses a list of blessings to tell his disciples, us, what the kin-dom of God is like in our midst. It reflects, in part, the understanding that those who lack power, and struggle and suffer in life are actually blessed by God. This is very counter-cultural. **The blessings come not *because* they struggle, but because God is with them in their suffering, hardship, and powerlessness. On the other hand, the ones who seem powerful and prosperous now may not be in the sight of God, because such things often get in the way of faithful discipleship.**

The prophet Jeremiah uses the revealing of curses and blessings to deal with a different theme, although still related to a relationship to God and one another. **Jeremiah's central theme deals with trust.** He basically asks, 'In *whom* and in *what* do you place your ultimate trust – your faith?' I suspect many of us have questioned at one time or another, or all the time, **what does it mean to place our trust in God?** Hopefully, and ironically, it's not what it has come to mean as printed on our currency.

Biblically, trust doesn't mean to sit back and do nothing because God is in charge and we trust God to do this or that in any given circumstance in our life. **The trust of which Jeremiah speaks does not mean the same as 'to belief', as in believing certain things *about* God. Rather, and again biblically, trust involves where we place our commitment and devotion, thus our time and energy.** The nature of each of our personal commitments, and our commitments as a community of faith, is one of the most significant things about us.

Jeremiah, therefore, presents the options of whether we place our trust, our commitment, in "mere mortals" or in God. He uses descriptive imagery to portray this internal struggle we all deal with. **Those who trust only in themselves or human institutions are like a small shrub in a hot and dry place in the wilderness, an**

uninhabitable land of salt. Those who trust in God, however, are like a vibrant tree growing by clear running water, sending its roots deep to stay nourished and bearing fruit. Jeremiah's conclusion is this: Blessed are those who are dependent on God rather than dependent only on self or others. That doesn't mean, though, that we aren't interdependent.

Let's explore now what all this may have meant back in Jeremiah's time, and then in our own time. The Rev. Teri McDowell Ott, editor/publisher of *The Presbyterian Outlook* puts in into context this way:

Jeremiah was a prophet to his people during a stormy time. He began his service in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. He lost his home along with others when Jerusalem was conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians. He ended his career with his people in exile. Here, in this Sunday's text, Jeremiah preaches a troubling message: They will not be going home. So how will they choose to live with exile as their new norm? Will they be like the shrub in the desert and not see when relief comes? Or will they trust God and be like a tree planted by water, sending its roots by the stream?

We can ask ourselves these same questions in our own time of exile. It's safe to say we won't be returning to pre-pandemic norms. Everything has changed. Everything has been thrown into turmoil. So how will we choose to live? How will we, like the trees, put down strong roots near a nourishing source of water?"...

**As we wander through this exhausting and uncertain landscape of pandemic exile, Jeremiah calls us to practices that nourish and sustain us, practices that root us to our living God and affirm us in God's extraordinary love. Each must find the practice that nourishes them the best.** Maybe affirmations will work for you. Or a practice of daily prayer and Scripture reading. I'll continue to find nourishment walking among the trees, hugging a few as I go.

I too, as I know many of you do also, find deep nourishment in that way. In fact, during last Friday's warm weather I took a nice slow walk through the wooded part of my property. And yes, I hugged a tree. Ott continues, "We must give ourselves these self-affirming and life-affirming gifts because we cannot nourish ourselves or others from a parched place of lack."

Here, then, are a few questions for reflection:

- **In what ways are you parched for nourishment?**
- **What practices nourish and strengthen you during difficult times?**
- **How can you extend your roots deep into earth, into your own self, into the source of nourishing love and grace that is the Sacred Presence of God.**

Let's go back for a moment and look yet again into what it means to trust. I find the following explanation about trust by Donald K. McKim very helpful. He is a Presbyterian theologian and editor for the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation.

Trusting in God means a renewing source of nourishment is always available. **Even in the midst of drought – when all else seems hopeless and a tree in itself may appear helpless – its roots receive needed nurture from the stream that give life to the tree.** The ‘invisible’ resources sustain, even when, to all outward appearances, disaster seems imminent.

Near the eve of the celebration of the 110<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of College Hill Presbyterian Church, we can find nourishment knowing our roots have gone deep, nurtured by God throughout the decades, through good times and difficult times. McKim concludes, “Faith is the trust that responds to Jesus’ command: “Follow me” (Mark 1:17). Faith is the trust to love others. Faith is the trust to continue living as God desires and as Jesus showed us.”

Let us, then, continue to reflect upon and live into the meaning of Jeremiah’s words, “Blessed are [we] who trust in the Lord, whose trust is God. [We] 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” (Jer. 17:7-8). **May these words continue to bring inspiration and hope during these difficult times of pandemic.**

To close, as Steve Garnaas-Holmes reflects upon this passage in his short poem, “Rooted”.

### Rooted

You are rooted in Love,  
 roots way down deep.  
 Love feeds you.  
 Sustains you.  
 Holds you.  
 Depend not on your strength,  
 but the love that flows through you.  
 Root.

He then suggests what’s known as a breath prayer, breathing in the word ‘Rooted...’, breathing out the words, ‘in love.’ Try that.

Blessings indeed.  
 Amen.

#### Resources:

Teri McDowell Ott, “Looking Into the Lectionary, 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany”, *The Presbyterian Outlook* blog, pres-outlook.org 2-7-22.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes, “Rooted”, unfoldinglight.net, 2-9-22.

Sarah Dylan, *Dylan’s lectionary blog*, 2-9-2004.