

*This message was delivered by Rev. Pamela Graf Short to the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church on the sixth Sunday of Epiphany, February seventeen in the year of our LORD two thousand and nineteen. It is based on the following scriptures:*

**Jeremiah 17:5-10**

17:5 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.

17:6 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.

17:7 Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.

17:8 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.

17:9 The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse-- who can understand it?

17:10 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.

**Psalm 1**

1:1 Happy 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;

1:2 but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on God's law they meditate day and night.

1:3 They 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.

1:4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

1:5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

1:6 for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

**Luke 6:17-26**

6:17 [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.

6:18 They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.

6:19 And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

6:20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

6:21 "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

6:22 "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Humanity.

6:23 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.

6:24 "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

6:25 "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.

6:26 "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

Our bible stories for today

are filled with blesses and curses, warnings and woes. They build us up and knock us flat; one moment they give us shade and the next burn us with the glaring truth of our circumstances. It is almost like they trick us into thinking we have something to be proud of, or secure in, and then Wissshhh! Like the curtain in the Wizard of Oz our true selves are exposed.

I can wiggle my way through the reading of the Psalm and maybe even this particular word of the prophet Jeremiah, but it is that pesky story in Luke that troubles my soul and catches me in the middle of my Hershey's and Häagen Daas.

Ah, but I am getting ahead of myself.  
The beginning of the story is pretty encouraging.

Jesus has just come down a mountain where he spent some time in prayer and in specifically calling 12 people who would hang close to him for the next 3 years. From the mountain Jesus steps onto more level ground and is surrounded by two great groups of people. The first is a great crowd of disciples, which I would say means a whole lot more than 12 or even 72, but implies pretty big numbers of people who chose to follow the teachings of this new Rabbi.

The second is a huge hodge-podge identified by geography: Jerusalem and Judea, Tyre and Sidon. Such a description highlights their ethnic difference—some Jews and some Greeks. It seems both groups included rich and poor, diseased and demon possessed. The story says the great crowd and the great multitude has three purposes that day:

1. To hear Jesus
2. To be healed of their diseases
3. To be cured of unclean spirits

When it came to the healing and the curing, apparently everyone received blessings for it says "Power came out of him and healed all of them."

Jesus healed all of them. Jew and Greek, poor and rich, friend and stranger. For an instant they shared a single common identity: Healed. We are the healed ones.

Ah, but the commonality is short lived. Whether Jesus senses a shift in the mood of the crowd, or causes the shift, I am not sure. What I do know, is that those who were once united by miracle are now divided by social status: the poor and the rich, the hungry and the full, the weeping and the laughing, the despised and the popular.

And so now a divided people hear Jesus:

Blessed are you who are so utterly destitute that you crouch and cower and beg for a scrap of bread;

Blessed are you who have long since given up looking for honor or dignity or hope in this world.  
Yes, you, pauper, I'm talking to you.

Blessed are you for yours is right now in this place and among these people, yours is the Kingdom of God.

Because I have not sat on a curb with a cup in my hand  
or stood at an exit with a cardboard sign wearing a tattered camouflage jacket  
or laid my child with a bloated belly down to die  
this blessing is not for me.

What Jesus makes utterly clear is that those I have excluded from my social circle are not only in God's circle, but are the citizens deserving of honor in the Kingdom of God.

Yours is the Kingdom of God.

All the rights and responsibilities of the Kingdom,

all the riches and honors of the Kingdom,

all the beauty and mystery of the Kingdom of God belong to poorest of the poor.

The untouchables are touched, healed, named, blessed with the full measure of God's care.

While all the other blessings are put in the future tense, the blessing of the Kingdom of God for the poor is here and now.

There is coming a time when  
the hungry will be full and the weeping will laugh  
and the despised will rejoice.

But that time is not yet.

No, that time is not yet;

but why is it coming?

Because the Kingdom of God is yours.

But woe to you who are rich.

I cry out to you that are wealthy!

What comfort can I give you for you already have chosen the comforts of this world.

Now this woe is surely for me.

I have already chosen the comforts of this world.

I like my leather couch

and cover up with two blankets as I watch

Geico Commercials.

I like my gas fireplace;

I don't even need to carry out the ashes.

I like my lake cottage

and my heated car seats

and my two computers

and my plethora of books.  
Jesus cries out to me: I feel bad for you:  
You are full now, but you will be hungry  
You are laughing now, but you will wail and moan  
Are you popular? At what cost? At what cost?

And so it is that now that the crowds are divided between the tattered and the robed  
between the laughing and the weeping;  
between the starving and the stuffed;  
Now that all our differences  
are obvious  
and awkward  
and embarrassing,  
Jesus gives us all the same instructions:

"But I say to you that listen,  
Love your enemies,  
do good to those who hate you,  
bless those who curse you,  
pray for those who abuse you.

Are you poor? Don't hate the rich, but see the deep needs in their souls.  
Have you overheard the beggars cursing you?  
Speak tender words of blessing to them.  
Has someone robbed your dignity  
or abused your pride  
or beaten you out of a dollar?  
Pray that God prospers their whole family.  
Has someone literally beaten you;  
bruised your body  
and broken your spirit?  
Pray for them. I am not saying you need to trust them, but you are called to pray for them.  
Pray that God makes you both whole.

Jesus takes those who were once divided by social status and reunites them with the most difficult of all  
commandments:  
Love your enemies.  
Do good to those who hate you.  
Bless those who curse you.  
Pray for those who abuse you.

From healing to blessing to warnings to love  
We are in this together  
Crowds and Multitudes  
Disciples and Enemies

I will end with these woes and blessings:

Woe to us who never look the poor in the eye  
for we have lost a great opportunity to see Jesus.

Woe to us who hold tight to our riches  
For we have no hands left to receive the hand of Christ.

Woe to us who deride the poor for we are like dry shrubs in the desert; with no love to water our souls.

Blessed are you who see the pain of your enemies  
For you shall both be comforted by Christ

Blessed are you who speak tenderly to those who hate you  
for you shall hear the delight of God's healing song

Blessed are you who honor those who have made you feel small  
for Jesus will stand beside you like a waterfall bringing nourishment to a fruitful tree, holy and good.

Now May our God who loves us enough to warn us  
Hear the cries of your heart  
Heal the troubles of your family  
Cure the spirits of your fears  
And unite your community in  
Love, Hospitality, Honor, Peace  
Now and forevermore.