

JEREMIAH 17:5-10 (p. 810)

FEBRUARY 13, 2022

LUKE 6:17-26 (p. 1078)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

O Gracious God, we ask you to be with your servants this morning, guiding our words and our thoughts. Enable us to learn your will, and glorify your Holy Name. Fill each one of us with your Holy Spirit, please. And open each of our hearts to your Holy Word. We ask these things humbly and prayerfully, in your Son's Name, Amen.

"BLESSINGS AND WOES"

I was standing in line at Meijer this week, and looked up to see a sign that said, "Power Ball Drawing, \$172 Million Dollars"! Now you know what it's like standing in line at Meijer. It takes a while, right? So, I started thinking. One hundred and seventy-two million dollars! That's a lot of cash! Do you know what you could do with that? That's a \$17.2 million dollar Tithe to the Church! Or even if you paid your taxes first—you know, gave Uncle Sam his fifty percent right off the top—that's still a Tithe on the New Proceeds, of \$8.6 million dollars!

Let's assume you give some to BACN too, and Habitat for Humanity, even saved a few thousand whales, and helped with the San Francisco homeless problem, think of the ministries you could still start here at Blaine! At least that's how I justified it in my mind! For just \$2 dollars, I could really change lives! Consider the Return-on-Investment! Just \$2 bucks! And then I thought, why not just put an extra \$2 dollars in the Offering Tray on Sunday instead? Which I did, as I walked in the door this morning!

The Lottery is an “all or nothing” sort of thing, isn’t it? You either win, or you lose. You take home the “Cash Cow”, or you go home with empty pockets. You’re either a million-heir, or you wasted your money on foolish living. You are either Blessed or Cursed, to use biblical verbiage! Money, is a funny thing to put your Faith in! There is a motto, written right on it, that tells us that! Maybe that’s why it’s there? “In God We Trust”, right!

Which is pretty much Jeremiah’s point. We are Blessed or Cursed, depending on where we place our Trust. “Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,” says the Prophet, who has confidence in Him.” He’ll be like a tree planted in a really great place! But Woe to the one who trusts in man, who puts his confidence in the flesh, or in the things of the flesh! Jeremiah then goes on, in verse nine to say, that the human heart is “deceitful above all things, and beyond cure”! In other words, we can’t even trust in our own judgments to make the call on right and wrong. We either do what God says, plain and simple, or we’re lost! Woe to you who Trust in your own opinion, your own thoughts, your own justifications!

It seems kind of harsh, doesn’t it? Or does it ring true? Would you agree that we have a tendency to fool ourselves about what’s right and wrong? Look around at our world before you answer. Or simply consider your own choices at times. Think Cookie Jar, if that helps. Would you say your decisions are always rational, and right? And here is the thing. Neither Jeremiah, nor Jesus in our second lesson, are referring to simply earthly Blessings and Woes. They actually point to ultimate, eternal ones. Blessings, based on your choices, certainly apply to the here and now! But the focus, the goal of their teaching, is clearly an eternal one! Does that change anything for you?

And there is no middle ground apparently, no compromise, nothing between Blessings and Woes! It's just one-way or the other, based entirely on where you place your Faith! You are either Blessed or Cursed. And it's your choice. So, how does that make you feel?

Jeremiah was a Prophet who, according to Historians, lived somewhere between 650 and 570 BC. The same time period as the Prophet Ezekiel, I might add, and roughly 50 years or so after the Prophet Isaiah. And they all said similar things. You can't have it both ways. We either trust in ourselves, what we make, what we achieve, what we do—what we invent, our own strength and technology and such—or we trust in Almighty God. It's a choice, our choice. And the outcomes are very different. Jeremiah then describes in a word picture what those choice entail.

Imagine a bush, he says, out in the middle of the desert, all alone. It's a scrawny little bush, forced to grow in the parched, alkaline soil, in ground that is so salty that you can't help but wonder how it even survives! The branches are brittle and dry, so-much-so in fact, that a tiny spark could ignite the whole thing on fire! I picture it as sort of short and squat, with no leaves at all, kind of like one of those tumble weeds that scurries across the trail in an old Cowboy movie. That's the picture of a cursed plant!

He then contrasts that wispy little bush with a picture of what it looks like to be Blessed. We now see the image of a great big tree, a mighty oak maybe, or a great big elm tree, one with massive girth! Its branches extend in every direction, reaching out, full of life, and full of leaves! It has a root system that stretches down deep, into the nutrient-filled earth, easily collecting all that it needs to mature and grow.

This tree is thriving right next to a stream, one filled with crystal clear water, gurgling over the rocks as it surges past. I see it surrounded by lush, thick grass and colorful ferns. I picture this wooded giant swaying gently back and forth in the breeze. The Blessings that this plant has received stand in sharp contrast to the Woes of the desert bush! Which is the point.

Jeremiah wants his listeners to feel the differences that our choices make. He wants us to understand that we can either live under our own strength and power, out in the desert regions, which will eventually fail! Or we can live an abundant life, planted by the streams of God. We can either fight for our very existence, or bask in the Blessings from the Lord's hand! Again, the focus is eternal! But again, our choices have immediate ramifications as well!

But I still wrestle with the all or nothing image, don't you? I want to Trust God, and put my Faith in Him, my Confidence, my all! I want to stand and grow in His Providence and Grace! But shouldn't I also believe in my own God-given abilities? Isn't that what good Stewardship is really about? You know, using what I've been given by God in responsible, helpful ways? Living up to my fullest potential? As they say in the Army commercials, being "all that I can be"!

I mean, that is the message that we get from the world these days. That concept bombards us constantly, from multiple angles, the media, the advertisers! If I just work a little harder, I can afford a new Lexus or BMW, a Gucci Bag, a Rolex! And if I drive the right car, and wear the right clothes, then I can be successful, right? Upwardly mobile, so to speak!

If we join the right Health Club or buy the correct Treadmill, we can achieve perfect health! If we invest our money in the right mutual fund, or buy the biggest condominium, or win that big lottery game, then we will have financial security forever! If we simply trust in ourselves, in our Brokers and Lawyers, in our Realtors and Bankers and such, then everything will be just fine! It sounds pretty good! So, most of us jump on the bandwagon!

We are bombarded with a “strive to succeed” mind set! We are encouraged to do better, get more, and then of course, buy more! We’re encouraged to give our kids everything that we didn’t have when we were young! You don’t want them to lack for anything, do you? Just smooth out the way for them! But what price are we paying for this? We put so much effort on the material world! And so little effort on the spiritual world! What kind of Whirlwind are we reaping?

Consider our collective mental health today. How would you say we are doing? Consider the break down in values and morals, in society, in the family, in the Church. You read the papers. You hear the news. You see what’s happening around you. Violent crime is skyrocketing! Suicide rates, divorce rates, hospitalizations for anxiety and stress are all on the rise. Anger is so common, and just below the surface, almost anywhere you turn. Even simply driving down the street. We have actually coined a phrase for it, just so we don’t feel so bad when it happens. We call it “Road Rage”! Maybe you’ve heard of it?

In the political realm, and the business world, right and wrong are often sidelined in pursuit of bigger and more successful ventures. “Adjusted” for a particular situation, so to speak, so it’s easier to justify! It’s called “Situational Ethics”. It’s all about winning the prize!

Only at some point we have to ask ourselves if the stress that comes from having Faith in our own abilities, and our own achievements, is worth the price that our families and our society is paying! We have to ask ourselves if grasping for the “Brass Ring” is really what we think it is! And we have to ask ourselves if this is really what Life with God is all about!

Maybe relying on myself, and my own abilities, and justifying it by calling it good stewardship, is really just fooling myself? What do you think? Maybe that’s what Jeremiah is saying in verse nine? “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.” Maybe, just maybe, this is why one of the names of the enemy is the deceiver? Maybe, that is really the point of the Beatitudes, the Blessings and Woes that Jesus shares with His Disciples near the Sea of Galilee?

Notice that this teaching takes place “on a level place”. I like Luke’s description of the location. It’s the same lesson reported by Matthew, where it’s called the “Sermon on the Mount”. But for Luke, it happens on a “level place”. I’ve been there. I would actually describe it as a great big flat plateau on the side of a really big hill! Geographically, both authors are correct. But I like Luke’s emphasis on this being a “level place”! It’s a great metaphor!

Taking excerpts from both authors, listen to Jesus’ values, in contrast to our earthly values. You know, the ones we tend to justify with sinful hearts. “Blessed are the poor, or poor in spirit, versus those who are self-reliant, or self-confident.” “Blessed are those who hunger, or who hunger and thirst after righteousness, versus those who are complacent, content, satisfied with the status quo.” “Blessed are those who mourn, versus the pleasure-seeking, the hedonistic, the self-focused.” “Blessed are those who weep, because you will laugh later.”

“Blessed are the hated, and the persecuted, because they follow Jesus. Those who are excluded and insulted, versus those who are popular by the standards of the world. Those who blend in, and adapt, who don’t rock the boat, who everyone speaks well of.” “Blessed are the Peacemakers, versus the aggressive and competitive.” “Blessed are the meek, versus the proud and powerful.” “Blessed are the merciful, versus the self-righteous.” “Blessed are those who know they need God, because they are right where they belong!”

Did you know that the word, “Blessed”, is actually a translation of the Greek word “makarios”? It means “fortunate”, or “happy”, “one to be envied”, “a recipient of Divine Favor”. Happy are those who know they need God first and foremost in their lives!

Did you know, as well, that the chief cause of unhappiness in our world today, at least according to the experts, is something they call “Hedonistic Adaptation”? That’s a fancy way of saying “an uncanny ability to always desire more, no matter how much you already have”! Rank and Privilege, Riches and Power, Earthly Rewards, no matter how nice, will never make you happy! They can’t! You will always want that one unavailable “Apple”! You will always want more! Apparently, just like Scripture tells us again and again and again, the only way to be truly “Happy”, “Blessed”, is to have an absolute, radical dependence on God!

I love the way that it is worded in Eugene Peterson’s “The Message”. It really brings it home for me! “You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all. God’s kingdom is there for the finding. You’re blessed when you’re ravenously hungry. Then you’re ready for the Messianic meal. You’re blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the morning.”

“But it’s trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you’ll get. And it is trouble ahead if you’re satisfied with yourself. Your *self* will not satisfy you for long. It cannot satisfy you for long! And it is trouble ahead if you think life’s all fun and games. There’s suffering to be met, and you’re going to meet it.”

If you are in a place where things aren’t going so well, you’re Blessed! Open up your eyes and see it. You are standing in the Presence of God, or more likely kneeling, but you are in the Presence of God! When things are bad, you tend to admit that you need the Lord in your life. Just ask yourself how many times you found yourself praying when there was no other way out.

On the other hand, when things are going along just fine, don’t most of us have a tendency to trust in ourselves? And in times of prosperity, what usually happens to your Prayer Life, and your Study of Scriptures, your Church Attendance? When everything is “okey dokey” in your world, how close to you usually feel to God? The Lesson on the Plain, on a “Level Place”—the Sermon on the Mount, as you “Ascend Closer to God”—the Truth of the Blessings and the Woes, is really all about where you place your Trust!

Imagine yourself walking through a desert. You’re thirsty, there’s no water, and you’re getting scared. And then, in a certain rock formation, you come across an old-fashioned pump. You run to the pump, start working the handle up and down, but you get no water. Then you see a can wired to the pump. You open the can and there’s a note. It says, “This pump needs to be primed, so I left a jug of water underneath the white rock. You’ve got to pour some water down the pump to wet the leather washer and make a seal, and then pour the rest down to create a back suction.”

The note goes on. “Now don’t you go drinking that water. You’ll need every bit of it to prime the pump. Pour it all in and pump like crazy, and you’ll get all the water you need. Just make sure you fill up the jug, and leave it under the white stone for the next guy.” Signed, “Desert Pete.”

Here you are, dying of thirst. You’ve got this jug of water, but some guy named Desert Pete says to pour it all down the well. What are you going to do? What if the pump doesn’t work anymore? It looks pretty rusty. Wouldn’t you be better off drinking the jug of water and saving your life? Are you going to trust someone named Desert Pete? You’re taking a big risk if you want to try for the fresh water! But think of the rewards, the Blessings!

Walking through the Desert of Life you hear about this Living Water named Jesus. If you want it, though, you’ve got to throw out the water of surface living, of pretense and pretending. Toss it all down the hole. You need to take the risk of letting Jesus, and perhaps His brothers and sisters even, help. Let them see the real you, not some facade. Be vulnerable. Tell them you are thirsty. It’s your choice though. Keep the safe, brackish water of conventional living, or take the risk of going deep, for the living water.

I know, it’s a tough choice from a worldly perspective. But there is the Good News. The one who asks you to Trust Him is not some guy named Desert Pete. He is the Son of God, Jesus the Christ. The Way, the Truth, and the Life. So, the only real question is, are you willing to take a chance on Him? And all of God’s people said, Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Holy God, we ask this morning that you turn our eyes, and our hearts, towards you—and away from the flimsy security that the world has to offer. We ask that you open us up to your will and your desires, so that we can receive the Blessings that you are so patiently waiting to bestow upon our lives. And we ask you Lord, to refocus our Trust on only you, and on Salvation through your Son, Jesus Christ.

Father, our hearts have reached up to you in our silent prayers, thanking you for being in our lives, and placing before you the deep concerns of our hearts. Please grant us your Strength, and your Compassion, and your Wisdom, with each of these cares. And Father, please fill us with your Holy Spirit. Our spirits long to be touched by your Spirit, to be filled with the Peace that can only come from you. We ask that through your Grace, you will grant us this precious gift.

Now Lord, with our corporate prayers, as one Church, one Body, one Family, we lift up before you these concerns as well. Please be with..... They are each a part of our lives, Lord, and each a part of your creation. Heal them Lord, in the ways that they need right now. And in doing so, give the Glory and the Honor to your Holy Name. Fill each one of them with the life that comes from your Holy touch. Make yourself known to their thoughts, and in all of their deeds. Pour Blessing upon them Father, helping them to feel you near. And please, do these things for us as well.

Lord, we offer these prayers this morning knowing that wherever two or more are gathered you are here in our midst. And therefore, with that Promise, and in the manner that your own Son taught us, we now pray together, saying, Our Father...