

Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-26

Almost everyone I know sets great store by the truth. We teach our children to tell the truth even if it means they will get into trouble. One of the most well-known particles of our national DNA is the quote from George Washington as a boy when he was asked if he cut down the cherry tree and he replied, "I cannot tell a lie." We ask people who are going to testify in court to place their hand on a Bible and raise their right hand and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Truth-telling is something that we value in our world. Being able to count on a boss or a co-worker or an employee to tell the truth is crucial in getting a job done and in keeping our world orderly. The truth is the skeleton of the world we inhabit and it keeps things predictable and in order. Quite frankly, the truth is highly prized and publicly required. But as much as we value the truth, as much as we demand it from ourselves and others, as often as we refer to it, the fact of the matter is, sometimes the truth can be very inconvenient.

If ever there were someone that we could count on to tell us the truth, it's Jesus. And this morning, in the gospel we heard from Luke, he spells out a picture of God's truth that is more than inconvenient to us. It is a complete reversal of our long-held beliefs about how the world works and even how we are supposed to be in the world. It puts us in a position where we feel forced to compartmentalize our spiritual life and our worldly life as if those two things never collided or impacted each other.

In the gospel of Luke that we heard this morning, we hear Luke's version of Jesus' sermon on the beatitudes and the circumstances under which that happened. We are all familiar with the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew which is a little bit different from this Sermon on the Plain that we heard in Luke. In the story that Matthew tells us, Jesus preaches this sermon from the side of a mountain...way above the people. And just before he preaches, he has provided some 5000 people with a feast of bread and fish. In Matthew's account there is a list of 'Blesseds' to

let us know what God values and who God upholds and who has a special place in God's heart. In Luke's version of the story, Jesus goes up the mountain to commune with God and then as he's coming back down the mountain, he chooses the twelve people who will be known as the disciples or the apostles. When he gets to the bottom of the mountain, he is on the level plain with the people. He is among them. He hasn't just fed them, but he has just healed many, many of them...some Jewish, some Gentile, some of unknown origin. If we look closely at this passage, we find that the word translated 'level' can also be translated as 'broken.' Surely Jesus has entered into this broken world to reveal the nature of God to all who will listen. He hasn't just fed this multitude of people, but he has healed many of them.

As he begins to speak, he speaks directly to his newly acquired disciples. He's not talking to the masses, although they can hear what he says just as we can. He is teaching his disciples, just as he is teaching us in His church, about the nature of God. He wants them and us to know what God values and what God's priorities are. True to the season of Epiphany, Jesus is revealing the nature of God. But unlike the "Blesseds" that we hear in Matthew, these "Blesseds" in Luke are accompanied by the same number of "Woes." So what does all this mean? In adding the "Woes" to this passage, Luke is pointing out the topsy turvy nature of the world as seen through God's eyes. The gospel of Luke is all about God's plans to reverse the values of this world and this information came to us first in the beautiful Magnificat attributed to Mary.

In many respects, our own world is just as topsy turvy in terms of our values as the ancient world was. For many in the ancient Jewish world, health and wealth were considered to be evidence of God's favor. If you had plenty of money and plenty to eat and nice clothes and good housing and plenty of livestock, the belief was that these were God's blessings to you because you had found favor with God. Conversely, if you were ill or poor or hungry or destitute, the belief was that these were all punishments from God because you (or perhaps even your parents) had done something that brought on God's wrath. There was not only pain in being down and out, but shame as well. In our day and age, these beliefs are still held by many and are known as the Prosperity Gospel.

So, here stands Jesus speaking to his newly recruited disciples in the midst of a sea of people that he has just healed, delivering the clearest, most plainly spoken refutation of the Prosperity Gospel that any of us have ever heard. Or should ever need to hear. Jesus tells them and us, “You’ve got it backwards! Let me tell you what God’s priorities are.” The people who have a special place in God’s heart are the ones who are poor; the ones who are hungry; the ones who weep; and the ones who are hated because they believe in Jesus and follow Him. These are the people that God treasures.

And then Jesus adds the ‘woes’. Woe is deep misery or devastation or profound sadness. And Jesus spells it right out. Woe to the ones who are rich; to the ones who are full; to the ones who are laughing; and to the ones who are held in high esteem by others. Does this mean that God is going to intentionally punish them? That’s probably not what Jesus means.

Every now and then an analogy pops into my head that helps me understand a concept. These analogies always seem to me to be gifts from God. So let me tell you about the analogy that popped into my head this morning. It involves travel: airplane, train, bus, etc. Consider that Jesus is the means of that travel. He is the plane or the train or the bus. He’s going on a journey and you’ll board him to go along with him on the journey. You’re standing at the airport or the train station or the bus station and something distracts you. You turn your head or walk in the direction of the commotion. Before you realize it, the train or airplane or bus has left without you. Woe is you!! And we all know the awful feeling of having missed the flight or the train or the bus! What Jesus is telling us this morning is: “Pay attention!!! Don’t miss the flight!” Keep your focus on your means of transportation.

What Jesus is pointing out to us is how lucky the poor and destitute are because they are very aware of how much they need God. It may be that God is *all* they have and they know how dependent they are on Him. That’s what makes them righteous...their awareness of God and their dependence on God. They are in a right relationship with God. That’s what God wants from us. God wants us to trust in Him, not ourselves. When we know that God is the most important thing in our lives, everything else tends to fall into place.

But how easily we are distracted when we are comfortable. How easy it is to believe that we are self-made, when in fact we were made by the one who created us...who knit us together in our mother's womb. We are His creation. We belong to Him. We did not create ourselves. Woe to us who lose sight of that fact. We are estranged from God only because we have lost sight of our dependence on Him. We drift far away from God when we take pride in our own achievements; when we feel safer and more secure because we have money in the bank; when we are lauded and praised by people around us and we believe that their admiration is what gives us worth. Jesus reminds his audience that the people did the same thing for the false prophets...because the false prophets told the people what they wanted to hear. They did not tell them anything that was inconvenient. The truth from Jesus is most inconvenient.

We miss out on a close relationship with God when we are comfortable...and woe is us. It's not that God is deliberately going to punish us, but God will allow us to drift away from Him if that's what we want. He won't stop us, but woe to us if we do. If we drift away, we've missed the most valuable thing about being alive...being in right relationship with God and being aware of our dependence on him. Sometimes it takes a jaw-dropping personal experience for us to step back and re-evaluate our priorities. Blessed are we when that happens. Because when we have one of those jaw-dropping, re-evaluating experiences, we are changed forever. We never see things the same way again. And it doesn't matter then whether we are rich or not. It doesn't matter whether we're weeping or laughing. It doesn't matter if we're hungry or we have plenty to eat. What matters is how we see our God and what priority we give to Him and how much we know we are dependent upon Him and ultimately belong to Him. When that happens, we are righteous. We are in right relationship with God.

And that's Jesus' whole point. God love each of us, but God has a special place in His heart for those of us who are keenly aware that we have nothing of value without Him.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.