

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany—Year C
Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-26

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount becomes a Sermon on the Plain in Luke's gospel. Jesus has just spent time apart on the mountain and chosen his inner circle—the twelve apostles—and they now have come down to a *level* place.

A level place—that's a powerful image.

And **in that space, people from all over**—from **Judea and Jerusalem and Tyre and Sidon**—from the **countryside**, and the **seat of power in the city**, and from **far away and foreign places**—they come and join Jesus there.

What brought them there?

They'd come to hear him, and be healed of their illnesses, and those troubled with unclean spirits longed to be set free.

The level place. Nothing *levels* us like **illness** and a **troubled spirit**, nothing *levels* us like **struggle** and **plain old need that is beyond our abilities and beyond our strength**—these are *the great leveler* that **pull us beyond our capacities** and **deep into the crowd** where the **common denominator** is **our need and our longing to be made whole**. And among that crowd of **humanity** is a **beautiful and blessed place to be**.

That's what Jesus is trying to get his disciples to see. Jesus wasn't bothered *at all* by all that need and pain. He didn't get freaked out that everyone who came was trying to touch him. He just let the power flow—and power came out of him, and he healed them all.

When Jesus turns from the crowd whom he is *healing* to his disciples whom he is *teaching*, he moves from the individual, with their *particular* need, to the plural and the collective. *Individual healing* is **powerful but incomplete without the **simultaneous healing of our collective wounds—we really are in this together**.**

Those who are **poor and hungry and weeping and hated, excluded, reviled and defamed**—**Jesus says that they are blessed**, BUT the **rich, the full, the laughing, the well-thought-of—not so much**—a lot of **woe** is coming their way.

And why?

Because **need is the crack through which God's love, God's presence, God's healing power can get to our heart. From a place of riches and fullness and laughter** (especially if it's the **superficial kind**) and **reputation**, it is awfully easy to **slide over into how self-sufficient we**

are and how well *we're doing and even to avoid* those who struggle because, goodness knows, **their bad fortune might be contagious**. And so, we **insulate ourselves** more and more and our **isolation and separation** *from* that wounded and wonderful common humanity only grows. And *from that place*, the woe of the rich becomes clear—you have *already* received your consolation and the consolation of riches *can't ever match* the consolation of a fellow traveler making their way through struggle toward healing.

This is what Jeremiah is driving home today. We need our need so that we know where to **drop our anchor and place our trust**. Jeremiah makes clear that if we trust in mere mortals and in our **human strength**, we're going to be like a **shrub in the desert**, living in parched places of wilderness—think uninhabitable salt land, a place that just can't support life. *That is a cursed and desolate place to be.*

BUT if we can trust *in the LORD, even more*, it's not just even trusting *in* some God who is somewhere out there, but it is *understanding* that the *trusting itself* IS the place where God lives, if we can **sink roots into that space**, then we're like a tree planted by the water that sends its roots out by the stream. *Then*, even when the heat comes, we don't have to fear—our leaves are green and there's plenty of life in them. We don't *even* have to be anxious if the days stretch into a year of drought; we're going to keep on bearing fruit.

Jeremiah also knows that the **heart is perverse, slippery** in the Hebrew—and remember, in the Hebrew, the heart is where our minds and emotions and passions and will *all* collide—basically, Jeremiah is saying, *“We human beings are a mess,”* but God knows how to search our heart; God knows how to sort us out, how to find that place of longing *and* fill it with love and God's very own presence.

We can choose to trust our *own* strength, but the *longer* we go in life, the *more* we realize that *our own* strength is way overrated, *and lonely*, and sooner or later, life will bring you something that's going to *level* you anyway, *and you will have to acknowledge your need.*

There is another way.

We can take our place *in the crowd*. We can acknowledge our limits and trust in God's strength. And *in that moment of decision*, it's helpful to remember that it's never too late to **sink your roots down in this soil of trust**—God will find all those roots you're sending out in the dark places and guide you to the water you need to live and grow and thrive and heal.

It's hard to **surrender to our limits and trust**, so I Corinthians helps us understand that our *trust* is warranted. Though it's a really convoluted passage, and it's easy to get lost in the weeds here, what Paul is driving at is this, *“You can trust resurrection. Death is not your destiny; resurrection life is.”* And let's not limit this to the death that comes when we take our last breath and the life that greets us at *that threshold*, *but* let's think about all the deaths we know in *this* life—all those places of pain, suffering, uncertainty, loss, dashed dreams, desolation, *all* those places that make us feel dead, *even as we walk this earth*. Paul is inviting us to trust that the dead are indeed raised; Jesus WILL raise us into new life; no matter how hopeless and dead we feel, *we can trust this.*

This **beautiful, wonderful, broken, wounded, full-of-need crowd of humanity** is a blessed place to be. Our **only obstacle** to *experiencing that blessing* is the belief that *we're just fine on our own*.

Let go of *that illusion* and take your place *in the crowd*—*Jesus is right smack in the middle of all that need*, letting his power flow, healing all who dare to touch him, raising to new life all who dare *to trust* that *resurrection* never was *just for him*, but always *for them* as well. Amen.

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February 13, 2022