

Blessings and curses
Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Sometimes things have results which surprise us. Years ago my father planted a couple of weeping willow shoots in the back yard and they took root and grew beautifully. To be sure the leaves made a mess under the trees but they did provide a kind of visual barrier to the next yard. Eventually, however, their roots disrupted the leach field and we had to take them down. A few years later, in another town, Dad again had a troublesome Willow, one which was reaching under the foundations of the house, seeking the connection to the sewer and he arranged to have it cut down. He men who were to cut the tree were to be paid \$25 if they could cut it in one cut, or \$50 if they had to top it. Dad had a fairly severe heart condition and as it started to fall on the garage he rushed outside to help tug on the ropes and direct it's fall, the extra exertion brought on his third coronary. When I saw him in the hospital he smiled and said; "I saved \$25 today, but I haven't seen the doctor's bill yet."

When I read the lesson in Jeremiah for today I thought again of the willow as the prophet speaks of those who trust in God as being like a tree planted beside the water sending out its roots to the stream so that even in years of drought it grows and bears fruit. Water is essential to green growing things. I remember riding a bus from Jericho up to Jerusalem, we were going from 85

degrees and very dry, to temps in the 40s with snow flurries all in the space of 15 miles and it started to rain. The barren tan hillsides and rocky canyons around us started to turn green before our eyes as fresh grass sprouted and out of a wadi came a Bedouin with his flock heading for the new grass. Those Judean hills look barren but if you just add water...life springs forth.

No wonder Jeremiah likened well-watered trees to people who trust in God for both bear good fruit as a result of where their roots reach. There is a lovely church on a hilltop overlooking the Sea of Galilee just above Capernaum where Jesus lived in the house of Simon Peter's mother in law and today it is surrounded by gardens and lawns. Wander in the gardens and you might notice that among the plants there are tiny black or green tubes that are used to distribute drops of water to the roots of individual plants. Virtually all the water in Palestine comes from the Sea of Galilee and the little Jordan River so it has to be carefully conserved. The Church is called the Church of the Beatitudes and is supposedly on the site where Jesus gave his "Sermon on the Mount" and talked of his vision of the new humanity, which would result from his teachings and example.

"Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God." Galilee was a poor backwater and we can be sure that even those disciples who had their own fishing boat were relatively poor. When we think of how radical is

the idea that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor, we begin to understand why people remembered Jesus' words. It is hardly as though his words summed up generally observable phenomena because the poor in the ancient world were not any more blessed and happy than the poor in today's world, even though they may have been more resigned to their lot since in their experience, almost everyone was poor and perhaps a majority in the cities were slaves with almost no human rights, as well.

What kind of a kingdom would it be where the poor have a significant part? Some of it is fairly simple. "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." The kingdom that Jesus was announcing is one in which simple human needs are met. The hungry are filled with the food and drink they need. That has not been one of the natural concerns of most kingdoms and empires. Most of our experience of the world is that those who have much, want more and are a bit afraid that there is not enough to go around or that the "poor" will not share responsibly or use resources efficiently. It might fairly be charged that much of "law" has been designed to protect the privileged. William Sloan Coffin has written; "law is not as disinterested as our concepts of law pretend; law serves power; law in large measure is a recapitulation of the status quo; it confirms a rigid order designed to insulate the beneficiaries of the status quo from the disturbances of change. The

painful truth – one with a long history – is that police are around in large part to guarantee a peaceful digestion to the rich.” (*Credo p. 35*) For Jesus to tell a crowd gathered to hear preaching and see healing that social justice demands the feeding of the hungry, without conditions and without exceptions, was surely as disturbing as some of the radical things Bill Coffin has said over his years as Chaplain at Yale and Pastor at Riverside.

The Beatitudes are either sheer foolishness, in which case we wonder why they were remembered, or they represent an intended change in the way human beings treat one another, an introduction to the kingdom of God. I do not think there is a great deal of room for sliding around this material. Jesus presented these changes in how the world works as God’s intention and the way of living in a world actually ruled by God. And it is not just social justice that is at stake here.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” Changes in human emotional response to life are implied. What does it take to bring laughter to those who weep? A church I served had a “Good as New Shop” where good used clothes were sold or given away and money raised for the women’s group at the church. The youth group decided to combine a fund-raising dinner with entertainment and announced a “Fashion Show”. There was considerable interest because it was known that my wife Holly is a designer

and was really good at Fashion Shows. We did one with a bit of a twist. Holly and the girls in the group set up the show and the boys and I modeled the clothes. Clothes were chosen from the “Good as New Shop”. For me, the high point of the evening came when I noticed the woman who ran the shop. Her husband had died suddenly a couple of weeks before, running the snow blower in a storm, and she and her grown up daughter were still in shock and grief. The change from weeping to laughter when they saw me in wig, tights, high heels, dress and beard was very rewarding to me. We tend to laugh anytime we see someone we think should be dignified looking silly. To really change tears to laughter requires a change in perspective and that is what Jesus offered. If this world is all that there is and we are stuck with the status quo there is not much room for those who weep now to rejoice but if the world is really in the hands of God and we are all intended to grow and change, to love and prosper as more responsible human beings those who weep may well laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 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.” Jesus ratcheted up the tension a bit further. It is not just that we need to look at the world with new eyes and

evaluate our lives and the lives of others by the standards of love, but we have to be prepared for personal rejection and persecution. This world will not actually turn into the kingdom of God without effort, struggle, or even revolution, and those of us called to advance that struggle must expect to pay a price. This is not simply a call to work now for a heavenly reward. Should we bring nearer the kingdom of God this world could become a heavenly place in the here and now.

Luke follows all this with the list of woes or curses for he was writing to a Gentile audience which might not have been so aware of the consequences of failing to live up to God's law and precepts. When Matthew listed the Beatitudes he noted only the blessings because he was writing to people who had seen the Babylonian captivity, the oppression under Antiochus IV, and the more recent destruction of Jerusalem, and had understood those disasters as the consequences of turning away from the will of God. They already knew the woes which follow on trying to be our own gods.

You and I live in a great country, one with a strong tradition of law and justice, opportunity for many, prosperity and now empire, or at least hegemony, based on our considerable military and economic strength. How important do you think the Beatitudes are to us as a reminder of God's intentions for the world?

