

6 Epiphany, Yr. C

February 17, 2019

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1, Luke 6:17-26

This morning's readings are about THE basic choice we make in life: the choice that determines our life's orientation. Much earlier in the Hebrew Scriptures, Moses told the Israelites that they could choose between life and death and he urged them to choose life. Today we heard Jeremiah setting out a similar choice – the choice between trusting in the Lord and thus becoming a source of life yourself, like a tree planted by water, he says, or trusting in mere mortals and becoming like a shrub in the desert, dry and lifeless. The psalm addresses the same issue: will you be happy and find delight in the Lord, being like trees planted by streams of water, or will you cast your lot with the wicked and be like chaff which the wind blows away? And then in Luke, the choice again, to be blessed or to live in a way that will result in woe.

The question is put to each of us: what kind of life do we want to have? What matters to us ultimately? What will bring true satisfaction and what, instead,

brings fleeting pleasure? At the Bible class on Thursday, someone mentioned how many people changed their lives after the events of 9/11, when they were brought up against the stark realities of loss and death. I couldn't help but think that those on the planes who managed to call someone called people they loved; no one called their stock broker.

So, happiness, blessedness, being a fully alive and beloved child of God. Two pathways, one of which is about anxiety, self-sufficiency and self-protection; the other about an internal peace, which is aware of both our limits as humans but also our talents, potential and responsibility.

Jeremiah warns against putting our trust in mere mortals. And we're tempted to put our trust there – in things like military strength, or technological innovation, or social status or economic achievement. I'd point out that none of those things are bad – they're only problems if we begin to think of them as the ultimate, the final, the most important things in life. Things like money and power are actually neutral; it's what we do with them that matters.

If we look for a minute at what these scriptures mean when they speak of being happy or blessed, it's obvious, especially in Jeremiah and the psalm, that to be happy, to be blessed, is to be someone who is a life-giver, someone who is a blessing to others. They both use that image of the tree, bearing fruit, giving life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that blessing is the visible, perceptible, effective proximity of God that demands to be passed on. To be blessed, he said, is to be oneself a blessing.

Do you remember the movie, "Fiddler on the Roof", and the main character, Tevye? At one point, he's praying, offering blessings on his family, the neighbors and even the tsar, although in that case, it's that the tsar stays far away from the village. And he offers thanks for all that is, for those things easily seen as blessings but also for those in which the goodness is harder to detect. But then he also sings about what he'd do if he were a rich man. And at one point, he says that he'd spend several hours every day in the synagogue, reading and discussing the holy books and that, he says, would be the sweetest thing of all. Put more theologically, he's praying to be in the presence of God and to be able

to align his will with the will of God. To be used by God as a life-giver, as a blessing to others. The sweetest thing of all.

Biblical scholarship tells us that Jesus' main focus, his primary message, was about the Kingdom of God. You'll remember a couple of weeks ago, when the text was about his first sermon in Nazareth, where he stood and read Isaiah's scripture about good news being preached to the poor, about his mission to bring sight to the blind, and release to the captives. That's his description and introduction to the Kingdom and what the Messiah is to be about. And remember that just at the start of his ministry, when John the Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod, and John sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the ONE or if they were to wait for another and Jesus responded by telling them to go back and tell John what they saw: that the lame could walk, the blind could see – in all that, in the healing and blessing, the Kingdom of God was breaking in.

And this vision of the Kingdom is the seed bed for the Beatitudes. It's a vision of a social order that will

be life-giving and sustaining to all. The blessings are there to show us what God wants; the woes are there as warnings against a wasted life.

So, choose. And what standards or guidelines do we use in making our choices? We could ask ourselves What Would Jesus Do, or we could ask what love would require or we could ask ourselves what action is appropriate or even demanded in the light of the vision of the Kingdom.

Megan McKenna has written about this Luke passage (*Blessings and Woes*) and says that “blessed” or “happy” in Greek mean the ones who do the will of the Lord. But she went back to the original Aramaic, which would have been the language of Jesus and his first disciples and there she said, it has a slightly different meaning, containing both choice and then action: Set yourself on the right way for the right goal. Get up, go ahead, do something, move, you who hunger and thirst for justice, you who are called to be a peacemaker. Get your hands dirty to build a human society for human beings, otherwise, others will

exploit and murder the poor, the voiceless and the powerless. So choose and then act.

In a world as connected as ours, we're tempted to be overwhelmed by the suffering that we see and hear about. So how do we respond?

I think the first thing is to realize what these scriptures are telling us about the person, the heart and the desires of God. If we're going to align ourselves with God's will, that's the first essential step. And they are telling us that every single person is a son or daughter, a beloved of God, and that God's desire is for each to live a life of blessings. One theologian put it this way: basic human thriving requires food, shelter, medicine, coupled with responsible use of resources that will provide the next generation of children what they need in order to live with hope. That kind of world is what God wants and what each of our choices should be helping to bring to fruition.

We begin with our own hearts and minds and our sometimes narrow vision of our connectedness. I've told some of you that my daughter and her family were in Indonesia when the most recent tsunami hit.

I was pretty fuzzy as to their itinerary to say nothing of the geography of the country and spent some anxious hours until she returned an e-mail saying that they were safe and far away from the disaster area. My first feeling was of relief and it was only secondarily that I remember all those others who had died. The lesson for me was that while it's natural to be most concerned for those near and dear to us, we also are called to expand our circles of concern to include every else – all brothers and sisters.

In the same book I mentioned earlier, McKenna tells the story of a photographer who was in Ecuador during a period not only of austerity but also of natural disaster. A relief agency was flying in supplies and he was there to document what was going on. He said the streets were filled with people who were tired, injured, sick, who had lost homes and family members. At one point, he saw a young girl, about 9 or 10, get in in line for food. She was thin and scraggly and had 3 younger children under her care. She tucked them under a bush for some relief from the sun while she kept her place in line. But by the time the girl got to the front of the line, almost all the

supplies were gone. She was given a single banana. The photographer said that her reaction amazed him. First her face lit up in a beautiful smile, then she took the banana, bowed to the aid worker, took the banana back to the other children, split it into three pieces, one for each of them. And they ate their pieces slowly while she sucked on the peel. The photographer said that he felt he had been given a glimpse of the Kingdom. This one poor street child, rich in love, care for others, and generosity and all in spite of poverty, hunger, international exploitation, the politics of greed and profit and human indifference.

So, what do we do, up here tucked away pretty safely in Door County, most of us retired and getting older? I have faith that if we open our minds and our hearts, if we pray that we can live in a way that's aligned with God's will, opportunities will present themselves. They may have to do with generous and loving care for a spouse or a neighbor, or perhaps for broader outreach in the community. Maybe it will be how we share our money with something that touches our hearts. Maybe it will influence how we vote. We're still here and God can

still use us. And we make choices every single day
– God grant us the wisdom and strength to make
those choices in a way that brings blessing and the
Kingdom ever nearer. The sweetest thing of all.
Amen