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Epiphany 6 – Year C
Jeremiah 17.5-10
Psalm 1
1 Cor. 15.12-20
Luke 6.17-26

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When we sneeze, we may hear someone say to us, “God bless you.” When we give a gift or do a good deed, the recipient may say, “Bless you.” At the opening of our worship, we usually say, “Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” And as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a colt that first Palm Sunday, the crowd cried out, “Blessed is the he who comes in the name of the Lord,” which we echo each week near the beginning of our Eucharistic Prayer. To be blessed is to be happy. In fact, the first word of the first verse of the first psalm in the Psalter is sometimes translated as “Blessed,” rather than “Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked.”

In the Bible, blessings and curses are closely related. God tells Abram, “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. Blessings are usually bestowals of God’s favor. Curses, on the other hand, are not so much the absence of God’s favor or invocations of God’s wrath, as they are calls on God’s righteousness in protest against desperate living conditions perpetuated by human selfishness, greed, and lack of mercy. It’s no wonder then that Luke, whose Gospel champions the plight of the downtrodden, the marginalized, and outcasts, like shepherds, Samaritans, women, and widows, has a healthy dose of curses for us today.

Today’s Gospel from Luke is a portion of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Plain.” You’ve probably heard of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount,” but that’s Matthew’s version of this discourse early in Jesus’ ministry. The two stories differ, however, in more than their locales – Jesus going up on the mountain to speak to the crowds in Matthew, with

Jesus coming down to a level place to speak to the crowds in Luke. The two stories differ in their impact and in their application as well.

While both stories include the beatitudes – from the Latin meaning statements of “blessedness” – Matthew’s beatitudes are addressed to the crowd. Luke’s beatitudes are directed primarily to the disciples. While Matthew’s beatitudes are phrased in the third person, like “Blessed are those who...,” Luke’s are much more direct in the second person plural, “Blessed are you,” or more accurately, “Blessed are you all...” (Luke must have been from south Galilee, but certainly not from Texas, where it would be “all you all.”)

There is a romanticism about Matthew’s beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Luke’s beatitudes, on the other hand, have an earthiness, a humanness, about them: “Blessed are you who are poor” – not poor in spirit, but poor, dirt poor, living in the margins of society – “for yours is the kingdom of God.” “Blessed are you who are hungry now” – not those who hunger for righteousness, but you who can’t remember when you had your last meal and your stomach is growling right now – “for you will be filled.” “Blessed are you who weep now” – not those who are in mourning over something past, but you who have tears rolling down your cheeks at this very moment – “for you will laugh” – not that you will be given only some comfort, but you will be chortling and guffawing until you’re red in the face. “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.”

Luke doesn’t even include Matthew’s other sentimental beatitudes: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth...Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy...Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God...Blessed are the

peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” Now there’s nothing wrong with being meek, merciful, pure in heart, and a peacemaker – don’t get me wrong – but Luke is more concerned with the poor, the hungry, those in distress, the downtrodden, the marginalized, the outcasts.

And then Luke begins with his curses – or “woes” as Luke calls them – which Matthew omits: “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you, when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.” Again, direct, and earthy, and human.

There are hard words for us to hear. These are hard words for us to understand. Most of us do not consider ourselves poor. I doubt if any of us can’t remember our last meal. I don’t think anyone is crying right now. I suspect that all of us fear a bit that our earthly riches will be all that we have come the end, that we will be hungry, that we will be weeping, that our reputations will be behind us, and we will have to face our Maker naked and give an accounting of our lives.

And isn’t that Luke’s point? That we do something with our lives while we still have time? Luke is reminding us of what it is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, how to live up to the vows that were made at our baptism, and how to live into our baptismal covenant. Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? By answering these questions “I will, with God’s help,” we are on a path toward blessedness, toward happiness, and avoiding the woes. We are blessed by God so we can be a blessing to others.

Jeremiah, whom we heard in the first reading this morning, helps bridge the gap in our lives between these seemingly polar opposites of blessedness and woes.

Jeremiah, like Luke, talks about blessings, and about curses rather than woes, but he uses imagery of trusting. Jeremiah says, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord." Jeremiah also says, "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord." To paraphrase Jeremiah, blessed are they who trust in God; who trust in Jesus Christ; who continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers; who persevere in resisting evil, and whenever they fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord. Woe to those who think they can save themselves, who put their faith in material things, who put their trust in human institutions.

In baptism, we are asked to renounce all the things that bring down upon us curses and woes: Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God? Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God? Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God? And then in baptism we are asked to trust in the Lord so we can be showered with blessedness: Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord? Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love? On our baptism day, it was decided for us where to put our trust. Where this day do you put your trust? Blessed are they who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.