6th Sunday after Epiphany

Jer. 17:5-10 Psalm 1 Luke 6:17-26

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 2-16-25

Our Gospel text for this morning is the first portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain according to Luke, the portion of the sermon we know as the Beatitudes… "Blest are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God… Blest are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled… Blest are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

A beatitude is a literary form used in Scripture to announce a person's "blest" state of being… And in our reading from Luke we hear that announcement of blessedness spoken to and about some of society's least honored citizens… "Blest are you," Jesus says to the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, "Blessed are you… for the kingdom of God is yours… now, here, present tense, and in every present tense moment to come."

We actually have three texts this morning that include beatitudes… In our text from Jeremiah we find a beatitude in the 7th verse, proclaiming, "Blest are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord." And in Psalm 1 we find the beatitude in the first verse… (although the word is translated as "happy")… "Happy, or blest are they whose delight is in the law of the Lord; those who meditate on God's law day and night."

If all these beatitudes did was to pronounce blessing on those to whom they are referring, they wouldn't be so hard to take. But all three

of them do something else as well… They declare that those whose lives do not reflect the quality defined in the beatitude are "cursed" or "woeful"….

For example, in contrast to those who trust in the Lord, Jeremiah proclaims, "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength. Cursed are those who turn away from the Lord."

And in contrast to those who delight in God's law the Psalmist writes, "the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor in the congregation of the righteous. Like the chaff they will blow away and perish."

And in contrast to the poor, the hungry, and the persecuted, Luke writes, "Woe to you who are rich. Woe to you who are full. Woe to you who laugh now."

Seldom do our texts for the day depict such a stark contrast, such an "either/or"… Seldom does this preacher, steeped as I am in the Lutheran tradition of grace, feel compelled to give a sermon that seemingly demands such a "do this, or else" kind of response… But as one commentator on Luke's version of the Beatitudes has said, *"if a middle-class congregation in North America doesn't want to hurl a few tomatoes at the preacher after her sermon on this text, then she hasn't done a very good job of it"…*

These are difficult readings, and none of them more difficult than the verses from Luke, whose curses seem to hit us as 21st century Americans particularly hard. In light of all we have to fill our stomachs, our houses, our barns, our portfolios, our resumes, our days and nights, there is simply no way to avoid feeling the sting of Jesus' woes…

So what to do?...Buy more canned goods for the food cupboard? Sell the summer house and give the proceeds to the homeless shelter?

As one theologian has said, *"There is always a tendency, when preaching this passage, to reduce it to a set of moral precepts, leaving the prosperous to feel a heavy shadow of guilt and looming judgment. Embarrassed by their riches, they grasp hold of futile works-righteousness, seizing on small, individual things to do that will, perhaps, add up to something in the eyes of God and make up for their status in life."*

But such a response, built on a list of moral "to-dos" in hopes that it will carry us over from the "cursed" to the "blest" side of things is not what this text is saying… at least not in terms of the God who is always waiting to do more with us and through us and for us than we ever imagined… the God who is always more about making soup than counting beans… The God who is always more concerned with relationship that with rules and regulations.

So what then? Where can we turn in hopes of answering the ever-challenging question of faith, "What does this text actually **mean** in the context of our lives and in the living out of our days?"

As I've thought about this question the past week, it's occurred to me that we might begin with an image used in both our text from Jeremiah and our Psalm for this morning… the image of the tree planted by the water, sending out its roots by the stream… The tree that does not fear when heat comes or become anxious in the year of the drought… The tree that bears fruit year in and year out... The very image used by both Jeremiah and our Psalmist this morning to speak of what the lives of those who are blest look like…

Both of these authors knowing that the tree has no chance of thriving or bearing fruit or extending its branches without being deeply rooted in the covenant, the law, the stories and the vision the God whose name is "I am"… the God of creation, liberation, justice,

steadfast love and mercy… Both of these authors knowing that being deeply rooted in these justice-filled, love-filled, mercy-filled waters is what provides the nourishment and sustenance for living a God-filled life…

A rooted kind of life described by Christian theologian John Shea who writes, *"Once we are rooted in graciousness, we have the freedom not to be self-preoccupied. With the assurance of a gracious grounding we are capable of moving beyond our fierce, small worlds and spending our energies on projects other than self-defense. This outward risk is the opposite of safety. The paradox of theistic faith, which is exemplified in the life of Jesus, is that living in relationship to a gracious God means living dangerously in an ungracious world… it is the radical possibility of an other-centered life."*

As we said in Bible study this past week while we were pondering the meaning of Luke's Beatitudes in our lives… Contrast the possibility of an "other-centered life" with the life of Ebenezer Scrooge, who, before he was visited by the Ghosts of Christmas past, present and future and had his heart and eyes opened to see the needs of Bob Cratchit and his family, was described as a "squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint... secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster."

… Or contrast the possibility of an "other-centered life" with the life of King Midas, who we come to know in the Greek tragedy "King Midas and the Golden Touch"… King Midas, who when granted a single wish, wished that everything he touched would turn to gold, only to find upon being granted this wish, that it meant his beloved little

daughter Marigold would also be turned to gold when he reached to embrace her…

Or contrast the possibility of an "other-centered life" with the kind of life held up in our culture as the "ideal"…. An ideal that tempts us to think our "greatness" is measured by the size of our bank accounts, the number of our possessions, and the height of the wall used to protect it all…

God does not wish woes or curses on those who are rich or those whose hearts are turned away from God… As the Psalmist says, the river of God is full of water, and God seeks to nourish the righteous and the unrighteous alike…

But sometimes we don't know our need for the water that nourishes the roots of our being… Sometimes we're so full of ourselves, our stuff, our way, that we "pull up roots" and head out on our own, thinking all we need is me, myself and I… **Woes are not sent by God to those who have forgotten their rootedness in God's love. Woes are a result, a consequence of being disconnected from the source of life and from the possibility of love…** Ask old Scrooge and he would tell you so…

While it may seem at first reading of Luke's Beatitudes that God visits woes upon those whose hearts and barns and portfolios are full to the brim and whose doors are locked for fear of what might be taken from them, the reality is that woes are a result of having little or no room for the presence of God or one another…

C.S. Lewis speaks of the cost of both blessing and curse this way… He writes, *"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and probably be broken. If you want to*

make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one… Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable… The only place outside heaven you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and uncertainties of love is hell… ***The only place outside heaven you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and uncertainties of love is hell."***

Blest are they who hunger, who thirst, who are poor now… blest are they who know their deep need for the waters of God's presence, God's love, God's justice, God's grace and mercy… blest are they who dare to risk the dangers and uncertainties of love, for theirs is the kingdom, the kin-dom, the "common-wealth", the reign of heaven, **not because they've earned it, but because it's part of the territory in the strange, terrifying, beautiful crucible of the thing we call love…**

I also want to suggest, even though neither Jeremiah or the Psalmist would have had this in mind as they used the image of the deeply rooted tree to speak of a "blest" life… I also want to suggest that the image of the tree reminds us as Christians that God will climb even the rootless, accursed tree to call us back into relationship with God's self… For that is the deepest meaning of the cross… That God would hang on the tree of woe and take into God's self the curse of hell we have made of our lives… that God should bring to our impenetrable,

irredeemable, rootless days the power of love, the possibility of something yet green and living to emerge from our broken branches…

There are crosses that speak such a story… Crosses that portray Jesus' crucifixion on the tree, and then from that tree branches which are full of fruit and leaves and birds of every color… As if to say that even for the most desolate and accursed of trees, or persons, there is yet hope… Often times these crosses are called "The Tree of Life"… and for good reason, I think.

It may seem a long way round from Luke's Beatitudes to trees. And yet I think not so long a way round at all… For if we have a hope of understanding the life to which Jesus is calling us in Luke's Beatitudes, we must start in the only place where there is such hope for the journey… the place where God's fierce and tender love can wash away the things that keep us closed up and tight and hard, and nourish us with the waters of a different kind of life…

A kind of life that turns upside down the values of the world, where "might makes right" and "the guys with the most toys win"… The kind of life that allows us to move beyond our fierce, small worlds and to spend our energies on projects other than self-defense.… The kind of life that will grant us the courage to refuse *to be perfectly safe from all the dangers and uncertainties of love… But rather to go there, into the dangers and the uncertainties, where we learn what it means to be blest…*

So this is where I intended to end my sermon… But then I decided to ask George to put up on the screen a photo I have been returning to again and again this week as I've wrestled with what the Beatitudes

might mean for our lives… (Those of you in church this morning will find it at the back of your bulletin).

It's a photograph of the Holocaust Memorial in Boston… An outdoor memorial which is made up of six glass towers engraved with groups of seven-digit numbers representing the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust.

On some of the towers there are also engraved messages like the one you see in the photograph… The full message, a portion of which is included in the photo, is a quote from one of the Holocaust survivors named Gerda Weismann Klein… The full quote reads this way…

Ilse, a childhood friend of mine

Once found a raspberry in the camp

And carried it in her pocket all day

To present to me that night on a leaf.

Imagine a world in which

Your entire possession is

One raspberry and you

Give it to your friend.

I draw your attention to the tree at the right side of the photograph… Consider its roots which no doubt extend down into an underground river full of water… Notice how its branches reach out as if to embrace Gerda Weismann Klein's words…

Notice too how the words invite us to imagine a gesture, a life, a possibility, a world almost impossible to fathom, even as we sense that somewhere in there, there is a blessing… the very blessing of which the Beatitudes speak…

Imagine a world in which

Your entire possession is

One raspberry and you

Give it to your friend.