

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany – 2025

Jeremiah 17:5-8

1 Corinthians 15:1-20

Luke 6:17-26

A dear lady who used to attend our beloved congregation and who moved away some years ago phoned me this week. When I answered, it was only weeping on the other end for some seconds. I knew who it was. She has cancer. It's painful. She gets scraped and it returns; over and over and over it returns. She is a humble woman, easily glossed over, unimpressive in the world's eyes. Is she blessed? When I first became pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church there was a couple who were shut-in, seemingly too early. The lady was always in a hospital bed, set up in their living room. A back condition kept her immobile. For years I visited them, bringing them the sacrament, nursing them with God's word. They stopped having me over. I learned later... suicide; one and then the other; what happened to them? We prayed for relief. All of us pray for God's will to be done. In praying for relief from pain, there is a line in a beautiful collect that concludes this way: "...if it is not Your will to remove this thorn in my flesh, grant me the strength and courage to bear my cross in cheerful submission to Your holy will." Could you pray that prayer?

In the explanation of the First Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism, we confess that our Creator, God the Father Almighty, has given us our eyes, ears, our reason and all of our senses and still takes care of them. He gives us food and clothing, house and home, family and all that I have. "He richly and daily provides me with all that I need for this body and life." "He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me." And yet we suffer. The book of Acts tells us that it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). Sin and death; this world is fallen and it is not going to stop being fallen; and we are blessed. Do you believe that? In the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye, a Russian Jewish dairyman, is praying and says this: "Oh dear Lord, you made many, many poor people. I realize, of course, that it is no shame to be poor. But it's no great honor either."

As a pastor who wears his clerical collar out in public pretty much everywhere but the tennis court, people will make note of me and chat briefly. There's one phrase that I hear more and more from people around town: "I'm blessed." I get the strong sense that they mean it, not for some economic or material reason, but because of something much deeper. I also get the sense that these folks who articulate their spiritual state of being didn't get there easily. Was St. Paul blessed? He complained about a thorn in his flesh. Not a minor nuisance, this thorn in the flesh was a genuine obstacle, whatever it was. He pleaded, begged that the Lord would take it away – three times. How many of y'all have ever been told "No" by God? Do you know how the Lord responded to Paul? "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). What kind of power is that? What kind of power is made perfect in weakness?

You may think that it's a theological shell game. Jesus says: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you and

when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!” (Luke 6:20-22). What? All that sounds inverted. Suffering is advantage, poverty is wealth, ignorance is wisdom – how am I supposed to understand these inverted beatitudes? Poverty itself is not a blessing. Jesus is not saying that one is blessed *because* one is poor. Jesus is saying that a Christian is blessed in spite of being poor. Each of you has a cross to bear. God has seen to it. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Luke 9:23). When Jesus said that, the people were astonished. A cross was an instrument of death, cruel death, an instrument of shame and abandonment and loss. It’s an intense call to discipleship. Christianity is intense. Christ is calling each of us to die, if necessary, rather than give up our commitment to Him. *That’s* where blessedness is – it’s in Him. Leave Him and blessedness vanishes. And no matter what your situation is – and I’ve seen God’s people in desperate situations – no matter what your situation is, when you are in Christ you are blessed.

Living for self – do you think that that is a serious problem in America in our late day? Living for self – do you think that your sinful nature continually attempts to justify your narcissism, attempts to justify your plans to do as you want, irrespective of God’s Word? How many of y’all are presently attempting to justify some behavior in your life that you know is contrary to God’s will? How is that spiritual warfare going? Stubborn you defying God’s authority in your life; how’s that going? Jesus pronounces woes upon folks not *because* of their wealth or their good humor or their positive reputation with their peers. He pronounces these woes on folks who have forgotten Him, folks who trust in the things of the world, folks who make living for this world, living for self, their agenda. God, speaking through Jeremiah, puts this whole thing in stark relief: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit” (Jeremiah 17:5-8).

Beloved of Christ the King – which do we want to be? Trust; how does trust manifest itself? How does trust show? Trust shows itself, trust finds expression by aligning our lives with God’s Word. Trusting in the Lord shows itself by *seeing* our neighbor, *serving* our neighbor and *blessing* our neighbor. Trust manifests itself by avoiding that which would besmirch our Lord’s name. Trust manifests itself by repentance, by turning from vanity and cultivating Christ-like virtue. What is Christ-like virtue? Honesty, modesty, chastity, integrity, courage, fidelity to what is good, forgiving others easily, defending the weak, building up the downtrodden, using your gifts for the furtherance of Christ’s kingdom – that’s the life of the Christian, that’s the life of blessedness.

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people were effusive: “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Luke 19:38). That blessed King was crucified. That’s God’s power made perfect. Christ crucified is the blessing that defines you as a believer. That blessing stands towering over every other variable in this life, every other variable in you – there is nothing deeper. The Son of God emptied Himself of any claim to life and He gave Himself into death for you. That is God’s

power made perfect in weakness, and Christ's blessedness is in you. This is you; this is the beginning to the book of Ephesians and this is you: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 1:3).

It is an honor; God has blessed us and that is an honor. We are forgiven, we are vested with power, and we are blessed. Redemption is the mantle we bear. Christ's name is emblazoned on our soul and we carry that name out into the world; it is an honor. We strive to do God's will because He has delivered us from darkness and brought us into His marvelous light. The Lord Christ became the greatest woe there as has ever been as He bore all sin and died forlorn, forsaken, and seemingly defeated. That Savior arose; death could not hold Him; death can't hold the blessed. God's grace is sufficient for you. No matter what your earthly situation is, you are blessed. God has seen to it. The blessed Lord brings His blessed body and His blessed blood to you, and the result is real and enduring and beautiful and trustworthy. What is the result? You are blessed.