

“Like a tree planted by water”

February 14, 2010

Text: Jeremiah 17:5-10, Luke 6:17-26

I.

Our scriptures today invite us to see what’s real and truthful in our world and to find places there to build our lives ...

Jeremiah struggles for a metaphor to lift Judah—the Israelites—out of her myopia and short-sighted ways. Again and again, God’s chosen ones ... the very ones God has loved so deeply through the decades and centuries—**they don’t get it.**

They forget ... lose the vision ... or they rebel and act silly. Again, they don’t get it.

And although an awful punishment is on the way, still, the prophet does not give up hope. He carves out a metaphor for people of faith, suggesting to them *what’s real ... and what we are to believe in and place our trust in.*

If we think about it, so much of what we sometimes focus on in life is transient and ephemeral. It’s short-term, fleeting ... here one day, gone the next.

Irwin Shaw wrote a short story called *The Eighty Yard Run*. It was about a college freshman who, in his first football game, broke loose for an **80 yard touchdown run**. Immediately, his teammates looked at him with awe. His coach said, *You’re going to have quite a future around here.* His girlfriend radiated in his presence. Life couldn’t have been any better.

But a strange thing happened. For the rest of his life, nothing ever lived up to that moment again. That was it—his mountain top experience; and the young athlete had some hard lessons ahead. There’s a sense in which ***we’re only as good as our last game ... our last win ... our last sermon***, whatever it is.

Success can be tantalizingly elusive in life. Everyday, we have to keep putting ourselves out there. We have to keep working hard, trusting in the best that is in us, hoping for the best outcome.

II.

In our reading from **Jeremiah**, the prophet reminds us to take care where we place our trust and faith.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, he says. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending its roots out by the stream.

- *It shall not fear when the heat comes ...*
- *In the year of the drought, it is not anxious ...*
- *All year its leaves stay green and it bears fruit.*

Trust in the Lord, says the prophet. Let the faith that is in you be *like a tree planted by water*. Such a faith is always alive and hopeful, because its life-source is close at hand.

What this is about is a reminder to us to be discerning about where we place our trust—and our allegiance and our deepest commitments.

The values of the world are always tempting—to trust too much in the short-term good deal, where greed and illusions of personal gain distort our sensibilities. Our current economic crisis is a painful reminder of this.

In our reading from **Luke's gospel**, Jesus' *Sermon on the Plain*, Jesus paints a picture of a God-centered life, a life where the values of the Spirit inform our minds and hearts to keep us on track.

1. *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.*
2. *blessed are you who are hungry now for you will be filled.*
3. *blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*
4. *blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you and revile you and defame you—all on account of me—for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets ...*

III.

All of these states—these conditions—are *blessed* because, from God's point of view, when we're **poor, hungry, and sorrowful ...** when we're **hated, excluded and reviled**, we're in obvious states of vulnerability. Our needs are more transparent. We trust more easily.

1. Anything that is pretentious is squeezed out of us ...
2. All illusions of worldly stuff—possessions, riches, the lure of the good life—are instantly put in perspective, to where we see what's really important. We see the truth of our lives.

And we're reminded how, in Christ, our faith is **like a tree planted by water**. Our life-source is always nearby. And it never fails. It never leaves us dried up, weary and lost.

IV.

We live in a world and a culture where there is great emphasis on short-term well being. Looking out for #1 ... making an instant profit ... getting re-elected ... getting in on *the*

good deal ... that, always—later—turns out to be *the bad deal*.

On virtually all levels of our culture, we somehow resist the long-term alternative. The alternative that looks at consequences. The alternative that includes everybody ... not just the privileged or those who happen to be in the right place at the right time.

To all of this the Bible says WOE!

WOE is a fearsome term in the Bible. Old Testament scholar **Walter Brueggemann** says WOE means *you're gonna die*. That'll get our attention.

That's precisely the function of WOE, to get our attention ... to wake us up and see the truth of our lives.

Luke's Sermon on the Plain is often compared to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. However, the *blesseds* of Matthew are never followed by the WOES and the CURSES, as they are in Luke. That's due in part to Luke having a deeper concern for justice.

The WOEs are **truth-telling from the underside**, from the vantage point of sin. They get in our face. We're not left wondering what they mean as much as we're left wondering if we'll be able to do it, to be obedient—to hear the WOE and act on it.

1. *Woe to you who are rich, for you've had enough of the good life.*
2. *Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.*
3. *Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.*
4. *Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that's what their ancestors did to other false prophets.*

These biting WOES say **wake up ... look at your lives ... hear the Word of God and be saved**. They exhort us to let go of the superficial in our lives, the ephemeral, the short-term ... all the trappings of our consumer-driven, celebrity-struck culture.

There's no ultimate meaning there. There's no joy there, no peace of mind.

V.

The gospel of Jesus challenges us to make tough decisions in life. It invites us to sort out our lives amidst a sea of temptations that encircle us at all times.

All the time, we have to choose: what to buy ... how much to spend ... whom to believe ... whom to vote for ... what kind of people do we want to be? We have to choose how to spend our time and live out our most hallowed commitments. In the BIG PICTURE, where do we place our lasting faith and trust?

The *blessings* and *woes* proclaim to us that our lives are so much more than short-term perceptions of value and meaning. Our lives are life-giving fountains of God's grace.

But for us to experience that grace—to know it—we have to stay close to God, ***like a tree planted by water***. Just as the water continues feeding the tree, God's spirit and grace continue to feed us. Everyday, we keep putting on our faith, giving ourselves to our faith.

Some years ago, Dr. John Hubbard, the former president of USC, took a trip to Texas where he happened to meet Tom Landry, the legendary coach of the Dallas Cowboys. Before he returned to South California, coach Landry gave him a Dallas Cowboys T-shirt.

Putting the shirt on one day for a golf game, his caddy noticed the shirt and asked him, *Sir, are you in some way connected to the Dallas Cowboys?*

Without thinking, Dr. Hubbard said, *No, not really; well, wait a minute, I guess you could say I'm sort of a scout.*

Deeply impressed, the caddy said, *I play football for Cerritos Junior College. My lifetime goal is to play for the Dallas Cowboys. That's my dream.*

Well, you may have to beef up a bit, Dr. Hubbard said, *but hang in there. You never know what the future might bring.*

By the time he sank his final putt on the 18th green, Dr. Hubbard had warmed to the eager young caddy and decided to give him his **Dallas Cowboys' T-shirt**. *I want you to have this T-shirt,* he exclaimed ... ***but it might be too big for you.***

The young man smiled at him ... and then he said something Dr. Hubbard never forgot: *Don't worry, sir. I'll wear it until it fits.*

I'll wear it until it fits. That's a good metaphor for our faith, isn't it? Keep putting it on until it fits. Keep building it up until it fits. Grow into it until it fits.

The life of faith is always a process. It's something that grows in us. It's something we work on day after day. Some days it fits better than others. But the important thing is to keep putting it on, keep opening ourselves to God, to the Spirit.

VI.

Wherever you are in your life friends, day after day, plant the tree of your life by the water ... so that your roots will be sent out by the stream.

And when the heat comes, you will not fear.

And when the drought comes, you will not be anxious.
For all year your branches will have green leaves and will bear good fruit.

There are no short-cuts to the *good life* we all hope for—no short-cuts to the faithful life.
At the end of the day, it's a life-style, a way of being—something we *grow in to*.

It's a way of waking up in the morning and going to bed at night. It's a trust, a sense of well-being that builds up over time. Again, it's not short-term ... fly by night ... superficial ... or some passing fancy.

It's LOVE-centered ... which means it's GOD-centered. I.e., *Do the loving thing*.

Do the thing that makes everything and everyone around you better.
Do the thing that honors the heart and compassion of God.

A GOD-centered life, a LOVE-centered life is something you can count on it; you can build your life on it ... Like a tree planted by water.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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