

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
February 13, 2022 – The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26
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Do you know why the date of Easter is different every year? In 325 CE the Church Council of Nicaea established that Easter would be on the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the spring equinox, which was determined by the church to be March 21st. According to this formula, Easter can be as early as March 22nd and as late as April 25th. Easter is one of the “moveable feasts” in the church calendar, the feast days that occur on different dates each year. In fact, we might call it the “prime mover” of moveable feasts because all the other moveable feast dates are determined by the date of Easter.

After Easter the dates of Ascension Day – forty days after Easter –, Pentecost – fifty days after Easter –, and Trinity Sunday – the Sunday after Pentecost – are determined by the date of Easter. Before Easter the date of Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, is determined by the date of Easter. Ash Wednesday is March 2nd this year. It can be as early as February 4th and as late as March 10th. The date of Ash Wednesday determines how many Sundays there are after Epiphany, a non-moveable feast that is always January 6th. There can be as few Sundays after Epiphany as four and as many as nine. Because Easter is April 17th this year, we have eight Sundays after Epiphany.

I offer this explanation of the church calendar because it affects our lectionary, the readings set by the church for Sunday worship. Because Easter is late this year, today and next Sunday – the sixth and seventh Sundays after Epiphany – we hear lessons we seldom hear. These lessons are portions of what is called the “Sermon on the Plain,” the parallel in Luke’s Gospel to the longer and more familiar “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew’s Gospel.

According to Luke’s account of Jesus’ life and ministry, Jesus had just spent an entire night on a mountain in prayer to God. He then called all his followers together and chose 12 of them to be his apostles, his emissaries. Jesus came down from the mountain with them, healed many people of diseases and unclean spirits, and preached this sermon.

Jesus begins with a series of blessings or “beatitudes.” Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are reviled and defamed. Unlike the beatitudes in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, in Luke’s account Jesus includes four “woes,” each one paired with a blessing. Woe to the rich, the full, those who laugh, and those of whom all speak well. Poor and rich. Hungry and full. Weeping and laughing. Rejected and accepted. If we are familiar with Luke’s Gospel, we won’t be surprised at this teaching of Jesus. In the first chapter of Luke we find these words in The Song of Mary: “[God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” A major theme of Luke’s Gospel is this great reversal of fortunes in God’s reign.

Matthew’s Gospel gives us “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Luke simply states, “Blessed are you who are poor.” No room here to spiritualize the passage. Jesus is teaching a major theme of the Hebrew Bible: poor and hungry people are not seen as cursed or unclean but as deserving recipients of divine and human care. People whose hearts are with God will share with the poor and hungry in compassion for their suffering; they will be merciful as God is merciful.

In Matthew's Gospel this teaching is unmistakable and powerful in Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (chapter 25:31-46). This is a parable of the final judgment of all people by Christ who has come in glory. Christ separates the people as sheep from goats, as righteous and wicked, as destined for eternal life or eternal punishment. What is the basis for his judgment? Behavior toward those in need. Giving or not giving food to the hungry. Giving or not giving something to drink to those who are thirsty. Welcoming or not welcoming the stranger. Giving or not giving clothing to the naked. Taking care of or not taking care of the sick. Visiting or not visiting those in prison. Christ makes it clear. When we act with mercy to those in need, we are acting with mercy to Christ himself. When we fail to act with mercy to those in need, we fail to act with mercy to Christ himself.

This is a hard-hitting message. It is good news to the poor and the powerless. It may not sound like such good news to us. We are all rich in so many ways. We have all that we need to sustain life – food, clean water, shelter, clothing, medical care and more. We live rich and privileged lives compared to so many of God's people throughout the world.

How might the "good news" of the Gospel be good news for us? It is good news if we shape our lives in obedience to Christ's teaching. One way we can participate in God's kingdom is by taking to heart Mary's words: God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. We who are rich have the opportunity to share our riches with the poor. For the love of God, we can have and use and spend less so that others can have more. We can voluntarily cause a small shift in the balance of riches.

This is definitely very challenging. When we are rich and full and laughing and accepted, we may very well forget that we depend on God for everything. We find this message in this morning's reading from the prophet Jeremiah: "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord." It is not a good choice to turn away from the Lord, but when everything is going well for us, we may be tempted to do just that. When everything is going well for us, we may also be tempted to forget those who are less fortunate than we are, who are suffering.

Jeremiah goes on from curse to blessing: "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream." A possible blessing of being poor and hungry and powerless, of having nothing to expect from the world, is a turning to God, a trust in God that comes from knowing that only God can help and heal and save. Though all of us are privileged in many ways, each and every one of us has experienced enough suffering and pain and grief to know what I am talking about. We have been – perhaps we are now – in situations when we turn to God with all our hearts, knowing that we cannot help and heal and save ourselves, knowing that no one but God can help.

My belief is that if we will allow our suffering and pain and grief to teach us mercy and compassion for others who suffer, and if that mercy and compassion for others moves us to do something to relieve their suffering, then we are close to the heart of our merciful God and walking in the way of Jesus, who endured sorrow and shame, betrayal and abandonment, pain and death and who always healed and always forgave the people who trusted him to help. My belief is that our lives – in times of prosperity and in times of adversity – can teach us to grow in compassion, if we will choose to learn. This is indeed good news and a rich blessing for those who have ears to hear and the courage to walk in the way of love. In Jesus' name. Amen.