**First Reading Jeremiah 17:5-10**

*These verses compose a poem that is part of a larger collection of wisdom sayings that contrast two ways of life. Life with God brings blessing; the power and vitality of God is active in our life. Life without God brings a curse, the power of death.*

5 Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. 6 They shall be like a shrub in the desert and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. 7 Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. 8 They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought, it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. 9 The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it? 10 I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

**Psalm 1**

1Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; 2 but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. 3They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. 4The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. 5Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; 6 for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

**Second Reading 1 Corinthians 15:12-20**

*For Paul, the resurrection of Christ is the basis for Christian hope. Because Christ has been raised, those who are in Christ know that they too will be raised to a new life beyond death.*

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain, and your faith has been in vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. 17 If Christ has not been

raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. 19 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. 20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

**Gospel Luke 6:17-26**

*After choosing his twelve apostles, Jesus teaches a crowd of followers about the nature and demands of discipleship. He begins his great sermon with surprising statements about who is truly blessed in the eyes of God.*

17 Jesus came down with the twelve and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.18 They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19 And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. 20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. 22 “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. 24 “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 25 “Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. 26 “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

**Sermon**

So, Friday was Valentine’s Day. How many of you got a Valentine Card for Valentine’s Day? Now of all the Valentine’s Day cards that were exchanged for the occasion, how many of them do you think contained a message like this: “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse-who can understand it?” Probably none, huh? That’s not a very Valentinesie message, is it? But that is the message about the heart that can be found in verse 9 of Jeremiah 17, which we heard read today. Prophets say things like that all the time…but I imagine if Hallmark started putting messages like that in their cards, they’d go under!

Let’s look now at the rest of the passage from Jeremiah 17 before we move on to the gospel. This passage uses the image of plant growth to convey the way of living that would be best for the human life. So, if any of you know anything about growing plants, this imagery will be right up your ally. The prophet compares trusting in mortals, that means, human beings, to trusting in the Lord God. And I’d like to clarify that, yes, there are times when we have to have some trust in people…we have to trust our parents to teach us and keep us safe, trust our teachers to help us understand, trust that our spouses love us, the scouts trust their scout leaders to keep them safe on outings. But this is talking about trusting in the ways that come naturally to human beings, trusting that human beings have all the answers, the solutions to our problems.

Jeremiah says that those who trust in mortals, which means human beings, they will be like a shrub, or a plant, that is trying to survive in a desert without water. The teaching begins with the phrase, “Cursed are those,” but that doesn’t mean that God curses those who do these things. It means that, as we will see, human ways are not always those that lead to life and well-being for us and those around us. But when we trust in the Lord God, our Creator, then our lives will be like a tree that has a good source of water and grows and turns green and bears fruit.

Along with this passage from Jeremiah, then, we have the passage from Luke 6. Once again, the passage presents 2 categories. This time, the categories are blessings and woes. And in this case, it is Jesus who is teaching. Jesus, who comes into this world as God walking and talking among us. As the presence of God in this world, Jesus comes to righten the relationships with humanity and our Creator.

Jesus begins by talking about who is blessed. And it probably sounds a little backwards. Jesus is announcing that those who are poor, those who are hungry, those who are weeping, those who are treated badly are those who are blessed. Usually when we think of experiencing blessing, we think of when things are going well in life. But here, Jesus is announcing that those whose lives are a struggle are actually those who are blessed. So, what is Jesus saying here?

In order to understand, we need a broader understanding of what it means to be “blessed.” Blessing refers to God’s presence being with us for care and protection. In Jesus’

time, those who were poor or who were ill or who had physical limitations were treated as though God was punishing them and were left to suffer in isolation. So, when Jesus teaches here that the poor, the hungry, those who were suffering emotionally, those who were mistreated and excluded were actually blessed, that God was actually with them, this was completely different from the understanding at the time.

And that is what happens. The ways of God get all messed up and distorted by human beings. It happened in Jesus’ time, and it continues to happen today. We really struggle to understand where God is and how God operates among us. We have been led to believe the same things believed in Jesus’ day, that when we or someone else is struggling with life then God is mad or punishing and when things are going great, then we must be experiencing God’s favor.

I would never tell you that we are not experiencing God’s presence, God’s goodness, God’s favor when things are good, when we are celebrating life. The problem area, however, is the view that God punishes us or leaves us when we struggle in life. There are many factors that contribute to human suffering. But whether we caused our own hardship…whether the hardship was caused by others…whether there is absolutely no explanation for the hardship…God is still with us because God created ALL of us and God loves ALL of us. God is with those who are poor, with those who are hungry, with those whose lives are bringing them to tears, with those who are being excluded.

And now, let’s talk about the “woes.” And again, “woe” doesn’t mean that these people are condemned to hell or anything like that. We could read it more like “woah,” as a caution, a warning. The woes are announced for those who are rich, those who have everything they need, those who have it good, without a care in the world, who are well-liked. The “woah” here, the caution here cannot be separated from the list of “blessed.” It is all tied together announce that living the good life is not ALWAYS a sign of God’s blessing, especially if we live it in isolation, enjoying all we have and acquiring more without any concern for the poor and suffering among us.

There is a teaching among some circles of Christianity that if we have enough faith, we will get everything we want in life and life will be great and easy. Those same circles will teach that, if life is a struggle, than we must not have enough faith. Jesus’ teaching here in Chapter 6

negates that understanding. So does his cross. In his teaching, in the company he kept, in his suffering and death on the cross, Jesus demonstrated that our God is a God who knows suffering, who is with us when we are at our weakest, with those considered weakest in society. And when we are at our weakest, we have the blessing of God’s presence, God’s strength, God providing for us what we need when we need it.

In this teaching today, Jesus provides a much-needed corrective that allows those who might be feeling like a parched plant…whether from suffering alone or from putting too much trust in earthly goods…to be nourished both spiritually and physically by God our Creator. Today, as we hear this teaching today, Christ is connecting us to that which is nourishing to our lives…the blessing of God’s presence with us. When we ourselves or others around us are suffering, struggling with life, God, through Christ comes to us to provide for us in ways we cannot see or plan for. When we are full, have all we need and not a care in the world, God, through Christ turns us toward care for those we see suffering and struggling. Christ teaches us all that our spiritual nourishment comes not only from our trust in God but also in our connection with others, our service and support of those who are poor, those who are hungry, those who are suffering, those who are being excluded. Amen.