

"#Blessed"

By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy

Jeremiah 17.5-10

Luke 6.17-26

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A few years ago, a book came out about trees and how they are connected. It was found in a study that trees communicate through their root system. If an area is dry, trees can communicate that drought to nearby trees. If one tree is suffering the other tree roots can share some of their water and nutrients for the others. This is symbolic of an abundant community. This is community at its best.

Of course, humanity is not there yet – we don't function as flawlessly or consistently as trees, but we are certainly connected as if we are rooted together. If one person hurts, we all hurt. This impacts the well-being of the community. Issues of poverty and housing and mental wellness and job opportunities are linked together. We cannot solve one issue and then move towards another. We have to work towards all of this at once.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu who died earlier this year used a South African phrase Ubuntu. This means that my humanity is intricately tied to your humanity. My well-being is connected to your well-being. When one person hurts the entire community hurts. If there's division among a few it is felt among the many.

The prophet Jeremiah understands this. Not only do we connect when we are rooted in community but when we can find the resources we need. When we have community organization, we can truly work with all of our gifts. The prophet talks about a system that is anxious versus a non-anxious system. We might wonder how can we not be anxious in this time? Our world is still struggling in pandemic and is changing rapidly. Perhaps we can aim to be a less anxious presence. The pandemic is another example of how we all hurt together or thrive together. If one person is sick it can be contagious. Or if one person doesn't mask it can be spread easily. Our breath is connected. Our hearts are connected. God has connected us.

It is clear in Jeremiah that the humans cannot be trusted. We are very flawed and will mess up. A human cannot put full trust in another human the way that humans should put trust in the Divine. This goes right along with some of the early reformed theologians like John Calvin and John Knox. This week during the Presbyterian class and a book study I am leading on campus, these reformers came up in conversations – many times. They are best known for talking about the sinfulness of humanity. Perhaps John Calvin is best known for his ideas of predestination and election. Originally John Calvin was trying to express to the congregation that they didn't need to spend so much time worrying about whether or not they would go to heaven. He reassured them that they were elect, which meant they were

predestined to go to heaven and that they could go about their business without worry. This was a way to make them stop trying to earn their salvation and do good in the community for the sake of the Gospel. Of course, this became about double predestination in which there are those who are elect and then there are those who are reprobate. To be reprobate means that one is predestined to go to hell. This shifted the narrative and theology quite a bit and also creates a huge schism in humanity. I learned recently that there is a new Calvinism, which I was unaware of, but it is incredibly focused on depravity and how awful human beings are. But God loves us. God loves us so much. Why would God create us only to condemn us? It doesn't make sense. So, I love this poem by Daniel Ladinsky.

"I think God might be a little prejudiced. For once God asked me to join God on a walk through this world and we gazed into every heart on this earth and I noticed God lingered a bit longer before any face that was weeping. Before any eyes that were laughing. And sometimes when we passed a soul in worship God would kneel down. I have come to learn: God adores God's creation."¹

God has an intention for us to be loved. I love the Lutheran theological idea of being simultaneously a sinner and a saint. I feel like it adequately reminds us that we are sinners and that we are depraved and that we can do nothing without God's grace. It also reminds us that we are capable of doing amazing things because of God. It reminds us that we are reliant on God and connected to God when we are rooted in God.

The prophet Jeremiah was living in exile with the people. They were wondering how much longer this new life would continue. As Episcopal priest, George H Martin wrote they wanted to know how long this "new normal" would continue.² The profit was giving the people an option. They had no way of knowing how long they would be an exile. What they could control was their own response. What they could control was how they cared for one another and how they connected to God. We have no idea how long the pandemic will be or how long we will wear masks but we can remind ourselves of how we may be in community together.

Prophet Jeremiah also talks about blessings and curses. What does it mean to be blessed? Often times this word has been used to describe experience of happiness or luxury or even privilege. I have done this on occasions. I have started rethinking how I use the word blessed after reading a book about the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel is about earning salvation through riches, specifically money and objects of wealth. There was a large boom in prosperity gospel theology during the 2008 housing crisis. Pastors would tell their congregation that they would be blessed by God if they owned a certain kind of car or if they owned housing. This puts great weight in salvation being linked to objects and

¹ Rachel Held Evans with Jeff Chu, *Wholehearted Faith*. (New York: HarperOne, 2021), 72.

² George H. Martin "Jeremiah 17.5-10" in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 338.

status. Being blessed meant being rich. And so, this made me wonder what it meant to be blessed. So sometimes when I use the word blessed, I also think about the opposite of what I said implying that it means to be cursed. So, if I say that I am blessed to have food does that imply that those without food are cursed? If I say that I am blessed to have a car, does it mean that someone without a car is cursed? If I say that I am blessed that I have made it through pandemic does it mean that those who did not are cursed?

Sometimes this helps me to remember my own privilege and it makes me realize the opportunities I have and to use them in helpful ways. Jesus flips our concept of blessings in the gospel reading. Lutheran pastor, Amy Zietlow suggested that we like to take the beatitudes as a type of personality quiz in which we can find out what kind of blessed we are.³ We want to check the boxes that society deems “good” in this list. Our gospel reading is also found in the Gospel of Matthew but the beatitudes are longer in that book. We hear the opposite of what society would say. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated. Jesus says that these are the people who are blessed. The people have expectations of healing in this passage and they approach him and tried to touch Jesus but he doesn't touch any of them. He gives reassurance verbally.

He told them that they may not have what others have in the here and now but that they are blessed. Jesus tells them blessed are those in community that others dislike, that others don't take the time to understand. Who are those people in community today? The immigrants? The poor? These are the people who find God's favor. Now this doesn't mean that the rich are the reprobate and there is no solution. Jesus meets many rich people overtime and teaches them and they change from their individualistic ways to a more communal living such as in the stories of Zacchaeus in Cornelius.⁴ Jesus always welcomed an opportunity for transformation. There's always room for sinners and saints.

So how do we live in community in this new world? How do we live with the tensions that arise in our community? In our world? I think we could probably work together and be a community in this room. That seems easy and comfortable to me. What becomes more complicated is when we bring in those who disagree with us. How do we be in community with those who want nothing to do with community? Who despise us? This is our challenge. How do we fiercely love those who are blessed and those who are cursed – God's translation, not ours? Let us look to God for the answer, and may it be so. Amen.

³ Amy Zietlow, “Reflections on the Lectionar” in *Christian Century*, (January 26, 2022, Vol. 139, No. 2), 23.

⁴ Peter Eaton, “Luke 6.17-26” in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 357.