

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany  
All Saints Church

February 17, 2019  
Year C

Jeremiah 17:5-10  
Psalm 1

1 Corinthians 15:12-120  
Luke 6:17-26

Dear Lord, help us to be like trees planted by streams of water, bearing your beautiful fruit.

There is a Rabbinic (Jewish) tale that describes a man who had so much trouble finding his clothes when he got up in the morning, he was reluctant to go to bed. He was afraid of the difficulties he would face upon waking. One evening, he wrote on a piece of paper where each article of clothing was placed.

The next day, he read his list and was so delighted to find his clothes. Yes, there were his pants. He put them on. Oh yes, there was his shirt. He put it on. Great! He went through his list until he was fully dressed. But then he said, "That's all very well, but now where am I?" He was bewildered. "Where in the world am I?" He searched everywhere, but without success. He could not find himself. (Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim, The Later Masters*).

Not being at home in our own soul, our own body, our own spirit, is such a human experience. I think we all struggle with our own integrity, finding our own voice, and living graciously and abundantly within the Self that God created us to be. It's not easy to be at home with yourself, comfortable in your own skin.

We might find ways to "dress" ourselves up and hope those acts of covering up will take care of our existential angst, yet all for naught. In the play, *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare has Polonius giving his son (Laertes) advice by saying, "This above all: to thine own self be true. And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man."

I heard that advice, "to thine own self be true," long before I read Shakespeare. I liked the challenge of it. Isn't that the stuff of heroes? If you are true to yourself, you are Accomplished. Confident. What you say and what you think are identical- consistent. You can act. Take charge. Don't we all want to live, believing we are true to ourselves, empowered by our individuality and self-ownership.

Yet, once I actually read *Hamlet*, I discovered that Polonius is one of those characters to whom Shakespeare does not present as profound (the man speaks "high" and acts "low"). Shakespeare is being sarcastic. By putting those words on the lips of Polonius, he's making fun of humanity's capacity to be true to ourselves. Actually, this advice from Polonius is laced with a self-serving agenda. "Son, first take care of yourself, and protect your own best interests first, then, it will follow, you can take care of others."

The tragic hero Hamlet becomes a mirror into our own humanity: wringing hands, not knowing what to do or how to believe or how to act, caught up in the ego. Indecisive sometimes, other times impulsive, even rash, susceptible to drowning in guilt and melancholy and betrayal.

Shakespeare presents humanity as a mess, and I think he's right on target.

I lift up this dismal picture of humanity because I want us to see Jesus looking out at the crowds and seeing us in all our weaknesses. These great throngs of people are coming from Judea, Tyre and Sidon, (geographically think State of NH). As far as you can see, people are crowding in on Jesus, wanting to be healed of diseases, unclean spirits, and their troubled lives. They are pushing up against Jesus, trying to touch him, trying to grab onto some of his obvious power, trying to be cured. It's a mob scene. Can we see ourselves there? I sure can.

Rather than being overwhelmed, Jesus looks out onto these crowds, this mess, with compassion and love. Jesus, who is true to himself, in ways in which we can only hope to strive, knows something profound about us. It's his great secret:

Jesus knows that we have a God-hunger which only God can satisfy. This God-hunger is part of our DNA design, and until we rest in God, this hunger will never be satisfied. God is always "more" and we always long for that "more." That's how we find our way to God.

Everything apart from God is sure to fail in giving us this deep contentment we all desire.

And yet, over and over again, despite ourselves, we keep trying to attain this contentment and assuage a deep restlessness, all through our own machinations. Our solo attempts will never work, and we are left with many woes.

I am reminded of one of my favorite Zen stories: A young seeker who wants to become a student of a wonderful master teacher comes to his house for an interview. The seeker rambles on about his prayer life, his past teachers, his philosophies, his accomplishments, his insights, his skills. The master listens intently as he begins to pour a cup of tea. He pours and pours, and when the cup is overflowing, he keeps pouring. Eventually, the student notices what's going on and says, "Stop pouring. The cup is full." The teacher says, "Yes, and so are you. How can I possibly teach you?"

Jesus is taking this moment to teach his disciples. In the midst of this insatiable hunger from the crowds, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the kingdom of God."

The word here is not just poor, but the "poorest of the poor." Not just poor, but those who have to beg. Jesus is talking about the destitute, the utterly reviled, the empty, the expendable, the wretched of the earth. And they are the blessed ones, they are the KOG.

I can imagine the disciples' response, "How are we these "poor" people??... because of course we are not that. We may be poor, but we're not wretched. Jesus is reminding his disciples, and us, that the poor, the hungry, those mourning, the empty, the lost, the littles, the last, the left behind are "it", are the glory of the KOG..... They represent that sheep Jesus went looking for.... Leaving the 99 behind to find it. This is the Kingdom of God. This little pathetic sheep destined to die who is abandoned in the wilderness.

It doesn't make much sense that it's a pathetic sheep that becomes the image of the KOG. Unless of course, you are that one lost sheep. Or the wretched. Or the mourning. Or the hurting. And, of course we are, no matter how much we may dress ourselves up with success or overfill our tea cups with our own importance, we, like the crowd, long to touch Jesus, to be healed, to be cured.... It's not so much that Jesus finds us... not to take anything away from Jesus' beautiful act of searching for us, but I think the whole point is that finally, the one lost desperate sheep is ready to be found.

So what lesson is Jesus sharing with his disciples? It's not an ethical teaching, but rather an invitation to healing. To be the blessed of God is the readiness to have nothing but God.

The desert monks who left everything behind to find God in the wilderness, speak about this "nothingness." Abba Macarius returns to his cell and finds that his possessions, few that they are, are being stolen. He begins to help the thief load up the wagon and then waves as the thief drives away. When asked how he could be so calm, he quotes 1 Timothy: "We brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world." Abba Euprepus, another desert monk, returns home to find thieves walking out of his cell with his possessions in their hands. He goes into his cell and when he discovered they had missed something, he runs after them, giving it to them as a gift.

Here's the great Christian paradox: Emptying yourself as best you can, following the way of Jesus, imitating as best we can, his own emptying, is how we put ourselves in a place to be found. And when we are found by God, we find ourselves, our true selves, where we are able to not only receive, but to give.

Imagine, you are one of crowd, pressing up to touch Jesus. If only he could heal you. (You fill in the blank of what you need and why you are there- whatever comes to mind, small, large, impossible, for you, for others). And imagine. Jesus finds you, only you, as if you are the only one in the world, in the midst of the throngs, and says:

"Welcome. I am glad you are here. You don't need to dress up fancy or come with cups filled with accomplishments. I recognize the Christ in you. Touch me. I am ready to receive what you have to offer, whatever it may be. I welcome you into my embrace; let me hold you. In all the ways you are hurting, in your hunger, and in all the ways you are lost, believe in my promise to be with you always. My home is your home. Pull up a chair. I need you to rest with me. "Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you."

It's when we rest with Jesus, we sit in the readiness to have nothing but God. And we are blessed. AMEN