

February 13, 2022  
Epiphany 6-C  
All Saints', Littleton, NH  
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Jeremiah 17: 5-10

Psalm 1

Corinthians 15: 12-20

Luke 6: 17-26

Several years ago I came to into the sanctuary on a Saturday morning and I found a woman from the florists at the back of the sanctuary who had come to pick up the vases for the Sunday flowers, and she was sitting in a pew crying. It turned out that her mother was very ill and when she walked into our space she just burst into tears. It was something about being in holy space, and this space, that spoke to her of God, of forever, of family, of caring, of healing, if not curing.

I want the Building and Grounds committee to think about this woman every time they are debating whether or not to repaint a wall, replace an exit sign, or improve the grounds. We cannot let our buildings become our 'idol' we vainly worship, but hopefully, in our good stewardship in our generation, it becomes a means of grace for future generations. And is this space that for you? But it is important to remember that if we lose our building, we would not lose our 'church'—for truly, we are the church! Without our grounded, faithful presence, the church would just be a relic, without anyone to minister to the crying woman in the last pew.

Ah, and what a great segue to Jeremiah and Psalm 1! 'Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust IS the Lord. (!)....."they shall be like a tree planted by the water, sending out its roots by the stream.' This 'tree by the water' we hear in the Psalm, scholars agree, was probably borrowed from this passage in Jeremiah. The notion conjured by Jeremiah is of a people who has confidence of who they are and where the nourishing water comes from. And, as he says, this tree '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.' In a time when there are wars and

rumors of wars, Ukraine chief amongst them, the confidence of the people of God can be a calming balm and a call to global humility. The loss of Archbishop Tutu at such a time is difficult when the world truly needs him—pray that others will rise to his vocation and ministry!

In the middle of the month celebrating Black History and with President's Day approaching, this saying in Jeremiah is comfort to the people who follow steadfastly and trust in the Lord through trial and persecution. Washington and Lincoln must have known this steadfastness and the blessing it provided; certainly Dr. King and those involved in the struggle for civil rights knew this. In fact, I can almost hear Dr. King's voice reading this passage with a deep abiding peace, with grit and determination. It was beautifully reflected in that great old anthem of the Civil Rights movement:

*We Shall Not Be Moved*

Well I'm on my way to heaven  
We shall not be moved  
On my way to heaven  
We shall not be moved  
Just like a tree that's standing by the water side  
We shall not be moved  
We shall not, we shall not be moved  
We shall not, we shall not be moved  
Just like a tree that's standing by the water side  
We shall not be moved

And also in the better known one, "We Shall Overcome".

For anyone to try and divorce the justice and civil rights struggle in the Civil Rights Movement from the deep-seated faith of its Leaders, would be to misunderstand the motivating factor of the movement. So how about you, how do you let your roots go down and tap into that ever-flowing stream? When Jesus had that interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well, he talked to her about 'living water' that he would give her. Where do you find your living water? If you think it is

in Episcopal Liturgy or in the social justice issues of the church, you are only looking at the branches!.....the roots go down into our faith, where our ‘trust IS the Lord!’ Taking time to let down those roots and soak up the living water is what will fuel you through it all.

There is a story about a priest who was driving to meet a colleague in an unfamiliar area and she was pulled over for speeding. She apologized to the officer and said she was lost and racing to get to an appointment. To which the officer replied, “And what made you think that by speeding you’d find it easier?”<sup>1</sup> This is emblematic of how, even as Christians, we often live our lives—lost, but racing around in hopes to find or fulfill it! To be sure, there are always things to do, and I am just as guilty as the next person with leading an all too frenetic pace sometimes, but we are called to stop, center ourselves, and live out of a deep prayer life and ‘The Practice of the Presence of God’, as dear old Brother Lawrence would have it. This practice is something that goes way, way back....do you remember?

“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. (Exodus 20: 8-11)

.....and, “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.” (Isaiah 30:15)

In the gospel of Luke this morning we hear a version of the beatitudes. In this version, somewhat different than Matthew and Mark, there are fewer beatitudes and they are stripped down to bare essentials: blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated, excluded, and reviled and defamed on account of Jesus, for their reward is great. Matthew sort of spiritualized these, for example, not ‘blessed are the poor’, but ‘blessed are the poor in spirit’—not quite the same thing. And I suppose there is much in history that shows how it is the poor who often show the way; and the rich who have lost their way. The Magnificat, the ‘Song

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<sup>1</sup> *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 133-134.

of Mary', says as much as well: 'He has lifted up the lowly, and the rich he has sent away empty'. And so much of the rest of Jesus' ministry and teaching say so too. I think it is no mistake that one of the central vows in religious orders is the vow of poverty. We can over-romanticize the poor, and certainly grinding poverty is no blessing, but it is our attitude toward wealth that corrupts us spiritually, and inhibits our ability to rest and let down our roots by the river to take a long drink.

William James, a leading thinker of American philosophers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and known as the father of American psychology, once wrote: "The desire to gain wealth and the fear to lose it are our chief breeders of cowardice and propagators of corruption. There are thousands of conjunctures in which a wealth-bound man must be a slave, whilst a man for whom poverty has no terrors becomes a freeman."<sup>2</sup> As Jesus also said, 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into heaven.' (Matthew 19:24)

So, this is hard for those of us who live in the global West, because basically all of us are rich compared to the rest of the world. Jesus would have us, at least, have the freedom of the poor that allows for a closer relationship with God. To be free from our things and our wealth, so we are forced to know 'our trust is the Lord'; and to know how that brings us close to the kingdom of God and alive to God in Christ Jesus. As Jesus kept saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand"; and as St. Irenaeus said, 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive!'

And one of the principle ways we become and stay fully alive is by practicing, knowing, and rejoicing in our roots firmly planted in that living water. When we are there, we know the risen Christ; as Paul said in the first chapter of the letter to the Corinthians: "but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness,<sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." But this power and wisdom is in constant need of refreshing, a refreshing that takes place in prayer that is rooted by the river of living water. When you take Communion today, think on these things that you may know the peace that passes all understanding....and in our generation cultivate the grace to minister to the crying woman in the last pew.

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<sup>2</sup> *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p.368; Interpreters p. 120