

**Sermon - 2/17/19**  
**"Along the Road"**  
**Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1, and Luke 6:17-26**  
**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Davidson College Presbyterian Church - Davidson, NC**  
**The Rev. Robert M. Alexander**

After reading this passage from Luke I immediately began to look around my office for some resource that would help me unpack what Jesus might mean by these blessings and woes. They seem awfully harsh – don't they? I mean – woe to you if you are wealthy and woe to you if your full, and woe to you if you are laughing? Folks – we're in trouble! I mean – who doesn't enjoy their wealth, or a good meal, or laughing it up with their friends?

I needed some help. Fortunately, on my shelf was a book that I had never read that was given to me from a retired pastor who was thinning out his library. *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* – perfect. "This passage has got to be in there and I am confident there will be a good explanation that I can share with the congregation." I said to myself. But no luck! The passage wasn't covered in the book. It was either too hard for the author or not difficult enough. But there **was** an interesting statement that I found helpful right there in the opening chapter.

"The hard sayings of Jesus take us right to the heart of Jesus' message. Therefore, much as we might like to avoid such texts, we ignore them at our own peril. At the same time, we face at every turn potential danger from mishearing them. There are serious questions here, for any – whether in the first century or the twenty-first – who would answer Jesus' call to discipleship."<sup>i</sup>

And that is exactly why we are here – to answer the call to discipleship – or at least to consider it. Why else would we be here in worship today? And why else would the crowds have been gathered around Jesus that day on the plain. The multitudes had come to him to be healed and to be set free from unclean spirits. As Jesus power flowed from him to the people gathered there, he looked into the eyes of his disciples and spoke to them from a level place rather than from a hillside. He spoke of blessings and he spoke of woes – warnings about the perils of a misguided life – comfort for those who had little or had given up everything to follow him – caution for the one who would seek after the ways of the world rather than the ways of God. He told his followers that they were in many ways like the prophets of old – who invited people to heed the message of God. They were not only to turn their own lives around and walk in God's ways but they were to call others to do the same.

We have seen before that Luke has a soft spot for the poor and marginalized. God's concern for these groups is evident in 1) Mary's Song – The Magnificat, 2) in Jesus' use of the prophet Isaiah to announce his mission to the poor and oppressed, 3) in stories like The Good Samaritan and the Rich Man and Lazarus, and 4) in his many mentions of women and children in his stories. The Gospel according to Luke invites the follower of Jesus to not only have a heart for the poor but to understand that the poor, in a way, have an advantage. They have very little to distract them from a deep faith and dependence on God. Our selfish pursuits of wealth, prosperity, full stomachs, and laughter only keep us from being the faithful disciples that we are called to be.

It isn't that God is opposed to money, or a good meal, or a joy-filled heart. It is that God is opposed to our making those things our priority over doing the will of God. Those blessings may, in fact, come as a result of a deep and abiding faith in God. We have all grown up believing that we have the right to pursue happiness – but Jesus tells us that what we are meant to pursue, instead, is to walk with him and to be completely devoted to the things of God. Happiness – blessing – will come as a result but it should not be our focus.

Our scripture from Jeremiah gives us a helpful image. Those who place their ultimate trust in humans and in the ways of the world will be like a tree or a shrub that has no source of water. It is parched, barren, and unable to produce fruit. In contrast – the one who trusts in God will be like a tree that thrives – with roots planted deeply into the stream of God's abundant love and mercy. This tree remains green, producing fruit for the sake of others.

This image is also used in our Psalm for the day – Psalm 1. We referenced it in our Call to Worship. The language is quite similar. The use of the terms blessing and curse are a bit misleading however. It isn't as if God is standing by ready to bless some and curse others. Instead the invitation is open to all to come and walk with God

and to devote oneself completely to God's ways. The one who accepts that invitation will find that their life is blessed – they find true joy and happiness. The one who rejects that invitation finds ultimately that they are left empty and without joy and happiness.

Jesus himself uses the image of the tree later on in Luke 6 in his Sermon on the Plain. There are good trees and bad trees and you will know which is which by the fruit they produce. "The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good." And when Jesus here speaks of good – he means the one that is devoted to the things of God.

Another image that I like other than the tree is the road. The disciple – the follower of Jesus – the student who has placed themselves under the authority of the master teacher Jesus – is also a pilgrim on a journey. And in that journey we learn how to walk in the ways of Jesus. Certainly we will stumble along the way – but we are never alone.

This image came to life for me years ago through a song written and performed by Dan Fogelberg. Fogelberg died in 2007 after a battle with prostate cancer and he left behind a beautiful library of music that is heartfelt, honest, and poetic. One biographer wrote the following about him. "If there's a "God-shaped space" in everyone, Fogelberg's was filled with music, something his family might've guessed if they'd seen how much he loved the music in church but was bored by the sermons."<sup>ii</sup> (I suspect there are some of you out there like that).

The song to which I refer is titled, "Along the Road." It is off the album *Phoenix* and it was written in 1979. Here are the lyrics.

Joy at the start  
Fear in the journey  
Joy in the coming home  
A part of the heart  
Gets lost in the learning  
Somewhere along the road

Along the road  
Your path may wander  
A pilgrim's faith may fail  
Absence makes the heart grow stronger  
Darkness obscures the trail

Cursing the quest  
Courting disaster  
Measureless nights forebode  
Moments of rest  
Glimpses of laughter  
Are treasured along the road

Along the road  
Your steps may tumble  
Your thoughts may start to stray  
But through it all a heart held humble  
Levels and lights your way

Joy at the start  
Fear in the journey  
Joy in the coming home  
A part of the heart  
Gets lost in the learning

Somewhere along the road  
Somewhere along the road  
Somewhere along the road

The line that speaks most deeply to me is that “through it all a heart held humble, levels and lights your way.”

The humble heart is a third image I want to leave with you today. We are invited to a humble walk with God – to place aside our own ambitions and to pursue the things of God. Pride and arrogance have no room in the life of the disciple of Jesus Christ. Instead we are invited to sit at the feet of the master and learn from him and walk in his ways – showing the kind of love he showed – being generous in the ways that he was – serving others and caring for the poor.

Frederick Buechner once wrote that “We are so used to hearing what we want to hear and remaining deaf to what it would be well for us to hear that it is hard to break the habit. But if we keep our hearts and minds open as well as our ears, if we listen with patience and hope, if we remember at all deeply and honestly, then I think we come to recognize, beyond all doubt, that, however faintly we may hear (Jesus), he is indeed speaking to us, and that, however little we may understand of it, his word to each of us is both recoverable and precious beyond telling.”<sup>iii</sup> It requires a humble heart to approach the pilgrim’s journey in this way. And it requires one to be willing to let go of their own sense of what life is about in order to discover the truth about life from our Lord and Creator.

Spanish born Jesuit priest Luis Espinal was murdered in Bolivia in 1980. He spoke out on behalf of the poor and the oppressed of Bolivia. He understood that it took a great deal of humility to set aside one’s own agenda and to offer one’s life for the sake of others – especially the poor and marginalized. Part of a prayer that Espinal wrote captures the deeper sense of what Jesus seems to want us to understand –

“Lord, a thin drizzle of humility is penetrating. We are not the axis of life, as our self-centeredness falsely claimed...We travel through life like blind persons; we did not choose life before embarking on it, nor do we know the day when we will depart from it... Life is larger than we are, and your ways extend beyond the horizon of our vision.”<sup>iv</sup>

Friends, humility is sorely lacking in this day and age. Along the road we will certainly trip, stumble, tumble, and fall - individually and communally. And that is ok. At least I think so. But we don’t seem to be able to accept that. People and groups have a hard time admitting their stumbles. They have a hard time saying, “I made a mistake.” And we hold people to such a high standard that we don’t give them permission to mess up...and sometimes we don’t seem very willing to forgive someone if they do happen to admit their failure. Whether it is a political leader, someone in the church, a friend or family member, we need to expect someone to humbly admit when they have messed up. And we need to be able to forgive them and help them get back up and set a better, more faithful course. That is how we grow. That is how we are called to walk along the road as people of faith.

I am sure we have some things we need to work on – how we spend our money – or our time- or our energy – whether we are really going to invest in real change for the poor or for the environment – whether we are going to really support the transformation that is needed in our educational systems or immigration systems. Whether we are going to adequately address the issue of gun violence. Whether we are truly going to work to ensure that all people are treated equally and fairly. May we set aside our personal ambitions and work to be in right relationship with God and neighbor.

In that teaching moment that Luke describes from so many years ago I believe that Jesus looked with compassion on his disciples and said, “Listen – when you are poor, when you are hungry, when you are sad, when people speak ill of you because of me – don’t worry. I’ve got you! You are mine. Stick with me and you will find blessing. For those who focus their lives on achieving all that other stuff – wealth, status, notoriety – one day it’s not going to be there for you – it won’t last. What I am calling you to is what matters most.”

Jesus invites us as individuals – and he invites the church as a community – to a course correction. And it isn’t easy. It truly is one of the hard sayings of Jesus. But there is a promise of blessing in the faithful response. Not a material blessing like some would have you believe, but a deep and true joy that comes when you are living exactly the way you were created to live. So may we humbly listen and faithfully respond so that our lives – individually and as a community – are in line with where God wants us to be.

To God be the Glory! Amen!

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<sup>i</sup> Carroll, John T. and Carrol, James R. *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus*. Hendrickson Publishers. Peabody, MA. 1996. P. 2

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/dan-fogelberg-mn0000166785/biography>

<sup>iii</sup> Frederick Buechner in *Now and Then*

<sup>iv</sup> Luis Espinal as quoted by Gustavo Gutierrez in *We Drink from our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books/London: SCM Press, 1984), pp. 126.