**Peter M. Antoci**

**Epiphany 6C**

**Jer 17:5-10, Ps 1, I Cor 15:12-20, Luke 6:17-26**

***God’s Blessing***

Today’s scriptures are filled with vivid images: verdant trees near desert streams, the resurrection, suffering people who receive God’s love, and at the center of these lessons is a concept of blessedness. It is repeated over and over. Now, that word can be translated blessed, or happy, or fortunate (NIB p 145). But in each of today’s lessons blessedness is rooted in something OTHER than present circumstances. It is rooted in TRUST or FAITH. And not only is blessedness rooted in the faith that we have, but this trust ROOTS US in a way that life’s circumstances cannot shake. The psalm puts it so vividly: TRUST in the right thing, and you are like a tree rooted beside a stream that never runs dry! THAT stream is God.

Now, lest we just spiritualize this imagery of blessedness, Paul reminds us that this lesson is also true of the life and death of Jesus. He connects the FAITH of Christ with the FATE of Christ, and in doing so he connects OUR trust, OUR faith, with OUR fate. He says, “If the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised … and YOUR faith (ie your trust) is futile.” Certainly, this reflects some controversy going on among the Corinthians about resurrection. History aside for a moment –there is something fundamentally theological to what Paul says about the Risen Christ. He seems to be saying that what happened to Christ, will happen to us, because Christ is one with us. For Paul, we can ONLY TRUST GOD because God is in utter and complete SOLIDARITY with us, our tragedies, and triumphs. God, in Christ Jesus, is ONE OF US. THAT is what we believe. THAT is what waters OUR roots.

Luke also challenges us NOT to spiritualize or sentimentalize this imagery of blessedness. His “Sermon on the Plain” is of course related to Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount,” but it is much more forceful because:

1. Luke includes an equal list of woes.
2. Because he writes directly in the second person: Blessed are YOU, rather than Matthew’s third person: Blessed are THEY.
3. Because when Luke says, “Blessed are the POOR,” he does NOT TEMPORIZE with the phrase … “in SPIRIT.” Poor means poor. It is HARD to sentimentalize Luke’s beatitudes because we who are relatively speaking – NOT poor – may indeed feel some discomfort … and that IS what Luke intends.

Throughout Luke’s Gospel prominence is given to the poor, to outcasts, and to those on the margins of society. (NIB pp. 4, 25) Luke’s Jesus turns popular theology on its head, because in THAT theology WEALTH is a sign of God’s blessing. Not so here: Luke exposes the lie of any kind of *prosperity Gospel*. Here, Jesus repeatedly emphasizes the potential blessings of poverty versus the dangers of wealth. He saw poverty as a condition of greater dependence upon God, greater trust in God, greater humility before God (NIB p 25). But here is the catch, when Luke says the poor are BLESSED, he is NOT using that as an ADJECTIVE. He is using it as a PRAYER. It is actually more of a subjunctive – it means something like ***“May God’s Blessing Be Upon*** the Poor.” So, these beatitudes are BENEDICTIONS, THEY ARE NOT adjectives. Furthermore, these Jesus teaches these benedictions to his disciples, NOT to the crowd at large, which means this is a teaching for the Church to follow. It is closely followed by instructions not to judge, and especially to LOVE our enemies. So, we cannot use these beatitudes to compare ourselves to or judge others. We are meant to use them to PRAY A BLESSING on people who suffer. We are meant to be PRAYING DOWN THE BLESSINGS OF JUSTICE upon the earth.

So just as we should not sentimentalize poverty in Luke, we should also be careful not to idealize it. The beatitudes declare God’s commitment to vindicate those who have faith. (NIB p 143) The problem with success, prosperity, or riches, is that they can lull us into a false sense of security, and even a false, shallow sense of our own identity – the idea that we would be less of a person without our home, or car, or cell phone. The concrete advantages of life, things like beauty, wealth, or strength, CAN tempt us to forget or ignore our TRUE situation: WE CANNOT SECURE OUR OWN FUTURE. There is not enough money, good looks, or good health to secure anyone’s future. Only our trust in the mercy and justice of God can do that. (NIB 144) Only when WE BECOME the mercy of God, will God’s justice be seen around us. Even in a sumptuous event like the coronation of a king, the Christian liturgy hands the monarch TWO scepters. One symbolizes the king’s power to dispense justice. The other symbolizes the king’s power to grant mercy. They cannot exist without each other, and they cannot succeed without faith.

This concept of *blessedness* predates Luke by centuries. It is related to the ancient Hebrew tradition of praying a blessing upon your children. We find it present in today’s passages from Jeremiah and Psalm 1. The transmission of a blessing upon someone is NOT a judgement that they are good. It is a PRAYER, a calling down, a PRAYING DOWN, of God’s power upon that person. (NIB 145) Some of you may be familiar with the work of the psychologist Erik Erickson. He wrote extensively about the stages of human development, and described the first emotional challenge to be learned in life is to develop a fundamental TRUST, an inner FAITH, a confidence that you can then build upon as you grow. This is not an all or nothing proposition. We all mature emotionally in different ways and at different times; and between the ages of 1 to 6, we each negotiate this FIRST task of emotional health for better or for worse. But there is one thing that can proffer a great advantage upon a child of ANY age: the blessing of a parent. There can be no substitute for such words. The blessing of a parent can give us strong roots. But not everyone gets a parent’s blessing; and parents are themselves fallible human beings. For many people, parents don’t give their blessing, or they don’t have the opportunity TO give it, or they don’t give it very well. And then we seek other ways of finding it. That is when it is good to remember Jeremiah’s warning NOT to trust in mortals, and NOT to make people our ultimate source of strength. Only God can be that. The true, eternal, and sure BLESSING, the blessing that redeems our pain and raises us to new life, is the blessing of God alone.

And so, sometime today or this week, take a moment to listen for God’s voice, God’s BLESSING. In the midst of your busyness STOP to hear God speaking to YOUR heart, saying as NO ONE ELSE CAN: “I LOVE YOU. YOU are my beloved child.”

Those are words to trust.

Those are words to build a life upon.

May God Bless You!