

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 17th, 2019
Hiking Together
Rev. John Crow

Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-26

I love hiking trails. I always have. I don't know what it is about following a trail, but I think there is always a bit of adventure. If it's a trail that is new to me, I wonder where it will take me and what I will see. By the same token, losing a trail, or taking the wrong trail, can be a bit scary. Last I knew, there was still a Boise hiker who has been missing since Saturday, hiking on one of my favorite trails. There is always a possibility that something can go wrong. A few years ago I set off with Josiah and Stephen to hike Sunset Mountain just past Idaho City. The trailhead was easy to find, and the trail made a clear path seemingly straight up from there. After a while, though, there were forks in the trail—lots of them; and I wasn't sure which way to go. Each time I picked the one that looked like the main trail, or the one that was headed towards the summit. Even though I acted confident for my boys, I really didn't know if we were going the right way. Thankfully, we were on the right trail, and we reached the summit in time for lunch. Not everyone finds the right trail, however. And some wander off on side-trails, never reaching their intended destination. While He never mentions hiking,

Jesus warns of this very thing in His sermon recorded for us in today's gospel reading. So let's spend the next several minutes together trying to understand who those people are who follow the right trail, and those who don't, and what that means for us.

You may have noticed that Jesus' sermon divides quite nicely into two categories: the blessings, and the woes. The blessings are for one set of people, and the woes are for another. First, let's clear up some confusion. When Jesus refers to the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are persecuted, He is really referring to a single group. This is clear from the text by the fact that their status *now* is really one and the same, as are the blessings Jesus says will be theirs. Jesus is using different words to describe the same group who endure hardship now, but will be blessed in eternity. The same goes for the other group. Those who are wealthy, well-fed, happy in their lot, and praised by others are all the same group, and they face the same unhappy future. But why? What is so great about the poor and so awful about the rich? Is there something inherent in either situation that leads automatically to blessings or woes? The answer isn't as straight-forward as you might think. In the context of Jesus' sermon, the answer has three parts.

First is the first century Jewish cultural understanding of wealth. Wealth was for the purpose of benefiting society, and thus increasing one's reputation and honor. Accumulating wealth for wealth's sake was considered foolish. In fact, it was worse than foolish, because the common belief was that there was only so much wealth to go around. It was a limited good, which meant the more **you** have, the less for **me**. The honorable thing to do was to have enough for one's family, but not strive for more, because that would take away from others. So, those who enjoyed, or even flaunted their wealth were both foolish and greedy. They ignored what was socially acceptable, and harmed others in the process. Tax collectors were a perfect example of this.

Another way to understand the question of inherent goodness or evil in being poor or rich is to understand that poverty tends to make one reliant on God, while wealth makes one feel secure in their own material possessions. It is only natural that someone in need would look anywhere possible for help, including to God. It is also natural that someone who has abundant material resources will rely on those first to resolve problems. God may not enter into a rich man's thinking until all else has failed. While these results are natural, they aren't automatic. Not all who are poor turn to God, and not all who are rich forget their need for Him.

Lastly, the key to the whole question of any inherent goodness or evil in the two groups comes from Jesus' own words. The two groups are representative of the faithful and the heathen, which was a familiar theme to His audience: comparing the righteous Hebrews with the godless Gentiles. If that is all His audience heard, however, they were missing the point. The key comes in verse 23, and again in verse 26. Verse 23 states that the reward in Heaven will be great, and the faithful prophets of old were treated just like the faithful now, in Jesus' day. Contrast that with verse 26 which says those who are praised by men are receiving the same treatment as the false prophets did. These two statements clear up a couple issues. First, it is certain that even though Jesus described the groups using different terms (poor, hungry, those who weep, and those who are excluded over and against those who are rich, well-fed, laughing, and those who receive praise), He is clearly describing only two groups. Those of the first group will all receive eternal life, just as the prophets have, and those of the second group will not, just as the false prophets did. Jesus' reference to the prophets and false prophets as metaphors for the two groups shows that He isn't necessarily speaking about those who are literally poor or rich. He is making an argument primarily about people in two different spiritual states: The faithful versus the unfaithful. I wouldn't go so far as

to say it's purely metaphor, but the emphasis is clearly on the *spiritual* state of the two groups, as opposed to their *physical* state.

The second issue that verses 23 and 26 clear up is that Jesus **is not** making an argument for the Old Testament belief in the Retribution Principle. In other words, Jesus is not saying the righteous will earn good things *in this life*, just as the evil will receive what is coming to them. I say it's an Old Testament belief, but we probably all know someone who thinks that way now. If you want to understand the Retribution Principle better, just review what Job's friends said to him. Jesus is making a promise for things to come in **eternity**. The hungry may never be filled in this life, nor those who weep be comforted. I know this grates against our own sense of justice, but keep in mind, God is more just than we will ever be, and unlike us, He sees the whole picture, through all time.

At this point, I want to make a short side-journey because we live in an age of heightened skepticism. Don't worry, this isn't a trail to nowhere, but more of a scenic detour. Who is Jesus to be saying these things? What is His proof? Our epistle reading clears these questions up nicely. 1 Corinthians 15:12 uses a negative argument to state that Jesus was raised from the dead, and because of that,

all who follow Him will also be raised from the dead. There were many witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, and His brother James became a leader among Jesus followers. And let's face it, if there is anyone you can't fool, it's your brother. With all this evidence we can have faith not only in the authority of Jesus to make the statements of blessing and woe, but also in His promise that they *will* come to pass. Jesus wasn't a mere rabbi, or even a prophet, but was God's chosen one, who has all authority.

What does all this mean for us today? I've already made it clear that Jesus is not saying that just because you are rich you are doomed; though as citizens of one of the wealthiest societies in human history, we do need to be on our guard spiritually. It's about where we put our trust. Our Old Testament reading from Jeremiah 17 makes it very clear that putting one's trust in the things of the world leads to spiritual death. In fact, Jesus' sermon was so similar in theme to the words of the prophet Jeremiah, that He likely had those words in mind as he preached this passage to His disciples. If you hear the words of Jesus (or Jeremiah, for that matter), and looking inside yourself you realize that you are in the wrong group, then it's time for a change! Don't stay in the woe group for another minute. Accept Christ into your heart as the one who paid the price for your sins, and make

His Word the blueprint for your life going forward. Be freed from the deception of the World and the woes that are its inevitable result.

If you have accepted Christ into your heart, then guess what? You are on the blessing side of the equation. Congratulations. You can go home now. Oh, but wait, that's not the end of the story. If you left Epworth today feeling smug in your membership to the Christ club, then I've done you a disservice. Let me give you two reasons why. First, Jesus didn't call us to be mere members; He calls us into relationship with Himself. In case you didn't know this, relationship isn't a "one and done" activity. I didn't take Mindy on a single date and then declare our relationship complete. She would have thought I was crazy if I tried that—and she would be right. Relationships require on-going effort. Important relationships ideally never end. Relationships grow in strength and understanding. In fact, the more time you spend with someone, the more you become alike. Jesus is inviting us to be with Him and like Him.

Why would we not accept all that Jesus has to offer? One doesn't claim to have climbed a mountain simply because they have reached the trailhead. That merely means you are on the right path. The best views are from the top of the mountain.

It's only from the top that you can look back and clearly see everywhere you've been. The summit is where the beauty of God's work can be utterly overwhelming. That's why I love climbing mountains. But there is one thing that makes the experience even better: hiking with friends. This is the second reason why you can't just go home feeling good about being on the correct side of Christ's blessings and woes equation. Many people are not on the right side. We are surrounded by people living their lives blissfully ignorant of the fact that they are on the woe side. They haven't heard, or at least accepted, Christ's invitation to relationship. Many are not even looking for the trailhead.

So instead of us leaving today feeling good about ourselves because of where we stand, I want us to leave feeling burdened. Sorry. How many people are you hiking with? How many more do you know who need your help to start the journey? In Christianese, helping others start the journey is called *evangelism*. Helping someone move on up the trail is called *discipleship*. Both are essential. You can't climb the mountain without starting at the trailhead. Some mountains have areas that are so steep, there is only one way to make it. If you stay at the trailhead, or allow others to do the same, then you are missing out on so much of what the Christian life is all about. Staying at the trailhead is the equivalent of saying *I'm going to wait until Heaven to enjoy the blessings Christ has for me*.

Ignoring others who either haven't found the trailhead or are struggling on the trail is like saying *I don't care about others*, or *I lack enough faith in Christ to act on His commands*.

I realize I'm being a little hard on you today; but that's only because evangelism and discipleship are **so important**, and you may be the one person who God has sent to fulfill that role for somebody in your life. We can't afford to say *let somebody else do it*. Don't worry, I'm not asking you to go door-to-door, or preach on a street corner, though go right ahead if you feel led to do so. The best way to evangelize and disciple is in the context of existing relationships, where you have already established trust. Don't have any friends in need of evangelizing or discipling? First, I don't believe that, but if I did, I would say time to make more friends. Evangelizing and discipling are some of the hardest things to do in the Christian life, but they are also some of the most important and most rewarding. Human nature is to avoid things that are difficult. Some of us go to great lengths to avoid difficult things. If we aren't intentional about fostering relationships for the express purpose of furthering the kingdom in these ways, then it probably won't happen. I tend to want to avoid being prescriptive from the pulpit because I believe in giving people enough freedom to find their own way to

apply the Word. This is a rare case, however, where I feel being a little prescriptive is warranted.

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist together, let it remind us of God's never-failing goodness towards those who love Him, and the never-ceasing offer to those who have not yet taken the step of faith to move from the woe side to the blessing side. While His greatest blessings await us in eternity, we have the opportunity to step out from the trailhead and experience a foretaste of those blessings **this very day**. And let us not keep these blessings to ourselves, but strive to bring others with us on the adventure.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.