

Sermon on Luke 6:17-26/Psalm 1/Jeremiah 17:5-10
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, February 17, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace, peace and blessing to you as we hear God's Word!

Sometimes speaking the truth clearly requires the telling of stories, to help us understand the truth underneath. That's what the Bible does – from the oldest stories of the Old Testament (*The Torah*) to the stories of Jesus in the gospels – the New Testament. I'll start with a story NOT from the Bible, but from the history of the Church – and modern culture!

This past Thursday many people all over the world celebrated Valentine's Day. Did you? It's a holiday associated with "romantic love", and becomes the occasion for sending Valentine's Day cards, chocolates, going out for a romantic dinner and a movie, and all kinds of love songs, sonnets and poetry, written by love-struck composers and poets. Where would the card business, chocolatiers, filmmakers, and popular music be without "love"? They would be nothing!

But most romantics have no idea about the history behind the real Saint Valentine. It starts way back in the third century, when Claudius II Gothicus was Emperor of Rome. He was nicknamed Claudius the Cruel because of his harsh leadership and this tendency for getting into wars and abusing his people. In fact, he was getting into so many wars during the third century that he was having a difficult time recruiting enough soldiers.

But Claudius was so narcissistic that he thought recruitment was down *because Roman men did not want to leave their loves or their families* (not because of any fault of his own for starting wars). Claudius the Cruel's solution? Claudius cancelled all marriages and engagements in Rome. Thousands of couples saw their hopes for marriage dashed by the single edict of a tyrant – thus creating a national emergency crisis in Rome. And no one dared stand up to the Emperor (certainly not in the Roman Senate, which was bought and paid for).

But one single Christian priest named Valentinus (Valentine for short) stood up "for love" – he actually resisted the Emperor's cruel edict. He secretly began to marry soldiers to their women before they went off to war, despite the emperor's orders. In 269 A.D. Claudius found out, and had Valentine thrown into prison, condemned to death. While in prison, Valentine fell in love with a blind girl, the jailer's daughter. On the eve of his execution, Valentine is said to have written her a sonnet in ink squeezed from violets, signed "your Valentine". Legend says that his words made the blind girl see. But Valentine was executed the next day, February 14 (the date Romans honored Juno, the Queen of their gods, goddess of women and marriage).

Centuries later Valentine was sainted by the Roman Catholic Church. How this story was turned into an opportunity to write poetry and sell greeting cards, well, you will have to ask William Shakespeare, or corporations named Hallmark! But the roots of the day are in a little-told story of a Christian priest who courageously resisted the foolish, cruel edict of a narcissistic Emperor, in the name of love. So, maybe you giving or sending a valentine with a message of love is a sign of your resistance to the power of hate in our world today! A noble thought.

So, today in our scripture readings, we have heard the powerful words of the psalm, of Jeremiah, and of Jesus challenging you and me as people of faith to hold fast to the Word of God's truth – even in the face of powerful rulers and evil in our time. The challenge comes in words of *blessings and curses* – happy are they who follow God's path of love, and woe to those who do not, and yield to wickedness. How appropriate are these words today, in our own time? You be the judge.

The challenge begins with the very first of the Psalms, the “The Prayer Book of the Bible”. We have already heard the words, which introduce the Psalms: *“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the Law of the Lord (the Torah – the “Instruction”), and on his Torah they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” (Psalm 1)*

In the psalm are both words of encouragement – urging the faithful to hear God's Words and follow them, because then you will be healthy and grow in faith. You will be blessed, and find happiness and joy. But those who do not, who follow other evil paths, will be blown away like chaff in the wind. The first lesson from the prophet Jeremiah is based on this psalm, as he said these words to his own people of Judah, who were following other gods and were not faithful to the God who had led them out of slavery in Egypt to this Promised Land:

“Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It 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.” (Jer. 17)

The people of Judah's lack of faithfulness and following other gods led to their suffering at the hands of the Babylonians, who destroyed Jerusalem and carried their leaders off into exile in Babylon. But even so, Jeremiah wrote, God stayed with God's people, and promised to bring them home one day. And one day they did return from exile to rebuild Jerusalem. But during Jeremiah's time, the people underwent great testing and hard choices. With the powerful Babylonian army approaching, in whom should they trust? Their faith in God, or the strength of their rulers and the alliances they might build with others? The people made bad choices in their rulers, and suffered the consequences. We humans are all capable of making bad choices, and following foolish leaders – and too many suffer because of it. This is a call from Jeremiah to repent, turn around, and follow God, and do what we know by faith is true, just and good.

Then there is Jesus. We read in Luke how Jesus came down from the mountain, where he had been praying with his disciples, to be with the people on a level place where multitudes came to him from all Judea, Jerusalem and from the coast Tyre and Sidon, to be healed and hear him preach. Jesus looked at the crowd with compassion, and said loudly so that all – especially his disciples – would hear:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.” (Luke 6:20-23)

This is what drew the crowds of people to Jesus – not only for the healings, the exorcisms and the feeding of thousands – but also for these words of hope. Jesus saw their suffering and the injustice of it all – he was sent by God to be God's eyes, to speak words of truth, hope, compassion and mercy. It would not last forever, and the faithful will have their salvation. Our world today is just as broken. These are words that so many of us need to hear today in our world, that hunger, poverty, racism and injustice that is so common in America and everywhere else, will one day end. Jesus also tells us that God is always with us, with you, that Jesus will be present whenever his name is spoken, in the hearing and preaching of the Word, and in the bread and wine we share in his name.

But Jesus had more, in words of warning given in the spirit of the psalms and the prophets: *“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.” (Lk 6:24-26)*

We hate to leave a passage from Jesus with such a harsh tone, but Jesus doesn't sugar-coat the truth. If you don't speak truth to power, or warn those who

abuse others of their sins, what good is the truth? People may not listen, but the truth needs to be told. So woe to the officials in a president's cabinet and advisors getting rich from their misdeeds, and on the backs of children and the poor, for they will receive their reward – and some go to prison. Woe to those who carry out cruel policies at the southern border, who detain men, women and children seeking asylum, separate families – children from their mothers – then lose track of the children but say they do not know where to find them, and don't have the resources or the will to find them. Woe to leaders who make up fiction about a threat of migrants and drug dealers crossing the border and want to build a wall, against the good sense of most Americans and the rules of our nation, just to fulfill a campaign promise, and the politicians who stand by and assent to this evil. Woe to senators and congresspersons who offer “thoughts and prayers” when thousands of children are killed in school shootings, in restaurants, theaters, churches and synagogues, and many more thousands killed in gun homicides every year in America, YET DO NOTHING to alleviate the suffering and pass NO LEGISLATION because the NRA has purchased their votes. Yet know this: rulers who are wicked always fall, and their names go down in history with shame, not honor. Traitors may be pardoned, but they leave no legacy of inspiration.

But they fail only when people of faith in God and in democracy resist evil, and stand up for what is right. Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew this, and stood up to Adolf Hitler when it was dangerous to do so – he was imprisoned and lost his life. Martin Luther King Jr spoke up against racism, but was killed too soon by an assassin's bullet. Eventually, dictators like Mussolini and Marcos were all defeated and overthrown, by the people. Bad news for them, but good news for humanity.

I say this to give you hope, people of faith. Do not be discouraged. Suffering does not last forever. But the hard work is still to come. We have won some small victories in St. Paul and in Minnesota by holding together, standing for faith values of compassion, honesty, fairness and truth. But things may get worse in our country before they get better – evidence shows that we are not out of the woods yet. It is clear that we have a fight on our hands to hold on to democracy, to keep our values of compassion and mercy for every child of God – not just those whom some define as “Americans” of one nation, race or tribe. God's love is FOR ALL THE PEOPLE of God, whom God has made!

The blessing for us is that the Church – especially Lutherans – emphasize the teaching that we live with both blessings and woes on this earth, often at the same time. We teach that we are *simil justus et peccator* - simultaneously “saints as well as sinners”. We can be blessed by God even while we go through various woes – faith means that we know God is there with us and for us even through the most difficult times. This is the strength you and I need when we care for a sick and suffering child, a beloved partner, or a dying parent at their bedside. We pray

in the knowledge of God's presence, the God who gives us life, even when we know we are dying. Then we pray and hope for the new life to come.

So, in other words of Jesus, "*have no fear, little flock, for the Father has chosen to give you the kingdom. Have no fear, little flock.*" Know that God's blessings are for you and all who have faith, even when steeples are falling, and all that we know seems in crisis or at risk. Believe in God, have faith in Jesus, who has come to give us all life in him. Thanks be to God! Amen.