

“Easier Said than Done”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

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Scripture Texts: Scriptures: Jeremiah 17:5-10

⁵ Thus says the Lord:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.

⁸ 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.

⁹ The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it?

¹⁰ I the Lord test the mind
and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.

Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷ He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

²²“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice 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.

²⁴“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵“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.

²⁶“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Meditation

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

Hang in there.

No pain, no gain.

Stand firm.

Let it go.

It will be over soon.

These are just a few of the comments people will make when things seem rough and we're trying to support someone in a time of struggle. We may be able to see that the outcome of a difficult situation will be worth the work to get through it, but to be the one in the midst of the storm sees with a different perspective. Sometimes it's hard to see beyond the crashing waves, so to speak, so to keep going becomes onerous. Sometimes we just want to turn back, to give up the idea that it is all worth the effort. Is it really? I guess it depends on the goal we have in mind. So for someone to tell us to “hang in there” in spite of the struggle is often met with a response of “that's easier said than done.”

Throughout my time in pastoral ministry I have walked alongside many people as they journeyed through difficult situations and struggles. Grief, illness, relationship break-downs, stress, spiritual crisis. There are times when even the seemingly strongest of optimists can feel like giving up or become overwhelmed by depression and despair. Some of the people with the most steadfast faith in Christ will wonder where he's gone, why he's letting this happen, why they are having to endure whatever they are dealing with. Why me? And so many times I have sat with someone wondering if I can find the right words, something to help them through the difficulty, or even just that moment.

Sometimes there are no words, so I sit with them in silence.

Sometimes we weep together.

Sometimes we just stare out the window together.
 Sometimes I listen and sometimes I speak.
 And sometimes I mess up and say something that really doesn't help.

I will always remember the night we realized Mom's cancer was getting a lot worse and she likely didn't have much time left. It was Christmas night. I went to sit with her while the rest of the family tried to get through dinner. She wept while she told me she was afraid. I was not a minister in this situation. I was a daughter. And yet I did my best to reach into my pastoral tool kit to try and help her. That wasn't what she needed. She needed me to just be there, to cry with her, to assure her I would keep walking with her. She needed me to be her daughter, not her minister. So when I said we knew this would come and we would get through it, she just looked lost. She could have told me that would be easier said than done if she had felt strong enough to talk. She was afraid. She didn't need me to talk about what was coming, she needed me to sit with her and acknowledge that moment. But in that moment, I was lost too. Finding the right words is often easier said than done. Hearing them can be the same.

Jesus always found the right words to say in any given situation. Of course he did, because his words are always the right words, even if we aren't prepared to hear them. In the Gospel reading today, the Lord teaches about blessings and woes, as we know them. Those to whom the woes are directed would obviously not be terribly happy about what he says.

If you're rich, you'll be poor.

If you're satisfied you'll become hungry.

If you're happy now, you're going to be sad.

Thanks Jesus. If we take these words at face value, it simply sounds like sour grapes about those who have much and are enjoying this earthly life while others do not have this experience. It brings to mind the phrase, "oh, how the mighty fall." For some people, there is a selfish satisfaction in seeing those the world perceives to be rich and powerful fall from their pedestals. It can be a pretty hard landing, and those who live with envy and jealousy in their hearts can be pretty harsh about it. But this isn't what Jesus is talking about. He isn't talking about stocks crashing and scandals destroying reputations. The statements he makes about woes for the rich and powerful and the statements about blessings for the poor, they go deeper than that. But still, sometimes there is something satisfying about the haughty taking a fall, and we can find joy in someone else's misfortune. If we're honest, we've all done it. Sometimes human weakness isn't very pretty.

In essence, what Jesus is saying in his rhythmic, captivating speech, is that those who are rich – distracted by power, wealth, reputation – have turned from the things of God. They are focused on their worldly gains and have forgotten their focus on heeding God's word and way. Those who are poor have no worldly distractions so they stay focused on God's hope and healing, God's word and way. In the long-run, the rich are becoming spiritually poor and the poor are gaining spiritual wealth. One can certainly be rich in temporal matters and still focused on God's word and way, spiritually rich. One can be poor in material things and pay no attention to God, spiritually destitute. That isn't the point. The point is to be careful about letting ourselves

be distracted from God – no matter what the reason. However, the quest for worldly wealth and the injustice of the unequal distribution of wealth is a part of this whole conversation too. It's more complicated than it may seem, and easier said than done.

Sarah Henrich, Professor Emerata of New Testament from St. Paul Lutheran Seminary takes an interesting approach to this passage that speaks to every generation, every time, every economic bracket. She writes: "These verses put today's hearers on a level... playing field... with all those to whom Jesus once spoke: the twelve, the crowd of disciples and the 'multitude' from all over the area. All these people, including us, whatever our commitments to Jesus as teacher or master, whatever our understanding, get to hear Jesus open such a different world view from our own that it still leaves us gasping, both stirred and shaken (apologies to James Bond).

There are two reasons that Jesus' words can leave us shaken. First, there is real power behind them, power to make things happen in his time and in our here-and-now. Before this teaching about God's reign and the way of being expected of all who are in relationship with God, Jesus is on the mountain, a place of closeness to God, praying... The multitudes and we dare trust Jesus' capacity to speak truly of God for he demonstrates God's power for good in healing and casting out demons. In verse 20, he spoke to his disciples (a larger group than the Twelve but including them). The blessings and woes that follow describe a world that reverses almost everything they (and we) know of how things work... in this third major presentation of Jesus' messianic purpose, he once again describes a world shaped by God and not human [values].

"Jesus' speech in these verses is quite direct. Note all the 'you' and 'your' (in the plural form) for both the beatitudes and the woes... Those who are blessed and those who hear the prophetic 'woe' find that their circumstances will be reversed. Poor and rich, hungry and filled, weeping and laughing, hated and admired are in the very process of being reversed or will be."¹

There is a danger, in sharing Jesus' words, of creating the misunderstanding that it is better to be poor and hungry, than to be rich and fulfilled, that God prefers the poor and miserable over the rich and happy. Again, that is not the point of this teaching. Rather, this is a word of assurance that God has made promises "to those who are suffering in this world that God still sees them, loves them, and is intent on their thriving. Jesus' words are also warning calls to his hearers that they are called to live with attention and generosity toward their neighbours, even as God is attentive and generous."²

Remember Jesus' response when asked about the greatest commandment: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself* (Luke 10:27). These go hand in hand. One cannot truly love one's neighbour without loving God, and one cannot be truly known to love God without loving one's neighbour. This is a call to reverse what the world has done, to level

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-617-26-2>

² Ibid. (Canadian spelling mine)

the playing field. This is a call, a warning, to strive for what is needed rather than what is wanted.

In John's Revelation, the writer shares the vision God gives him of what life will be like when God levels the field and all promises are fulfilled for all people. John writes:

I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away."

To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children (Revelation 21:3-4, 7).

That's what is to come when Christ returns to make his final claim on his people, redeem the faithful, and raise them all to eternal life with him – both the living and the dead.

But what about now? What about the present time when we clearly see the massive gap between rich and poor, filled and hungry, free and oppressed, justice and injustice? Our part of the world may boast of privilege, but the gaps exist right here, in our churches, schools, workplaces, and greater communities. Food insecurity is a far bigger concern than many people realize. The pandemic has drawn our attention to the staggering number of people who are homeless, have lost – or never had – financial security, and parents who live from day to day not knowing if they can feed their children. Mental health needs are at an alarmingly high rate, especially among young people. Many Indigenous communities continue to fight for clean water, adequate education, and accessible health care, even as they seek healing from the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and weep for lost children. An article in the news this week quoted an Anishinabe First Nation Chief who said, in speaking about the difference between freedom and privilege in Canada, "If your freedom is built on the denial of freedom to others, then you didn't actually have freedom at all... You had privilege... How can I put energy into supporting a 'Freedom Convoy' when we're still trying to find our lost children?"³ That quote comes from within the context of a greater conversation, but the perspective of one who speaks for generations of hurting people helps to give us a better understanding of how unlevel the playing field actually is. We, as disciples of Jesus, need to recognize and acknowledge the reality of this world and our role in it, and strive for change. That could mean calling out inappropriate comments and racist slurs. It could mean volunteering at food programs and shelters. It could mean advocating for those do not have the means to speak for themselves. It does mean taking

³ <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/first-nation-chief-on-the-difference-between-freedom-and-privilege-1.5773056>

seriously our calling to love those we may find unlovable – because they are God’s loved children just as we are, and they need to know it.

As Professor Henrich says, “God is creating a realm, bringing it to life among us by that same power that emanated from Jesus, in which no one is hungry or mourning or poor or disregarded at the very same time that others are abundantly well-fed, rich, laughing, and respected. It’s... these two opposite circumstances that God promises to remedy, and we are called to address in our own lives.”⁴

Easier said than done? Perhaps. But no one ever said it would be easy. Jesus never said it would be easy. In fact, in uttering the words we share from the Gospel today, he said exactly the opposite. It’s up to us to take it to heart, to step back and see how he is speaking to us, and to change our views and ways so that we can contribute to the building of God’s kingdom of blessings for all, equally, and in abundance. Amen.

⁴ See footnote 1.