

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany - February 17, 2019
Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

Poor, hungry, and weeping. Full, laughing and rich. Now there's a no-brainer. Who would ever choose poverty, hunger and sorrow over laughter, wealth and happiness? No one, I assure you, who has ever actually experienced these cruelties. There is nothing blessed about crying yourself to sleep because of the pain of an empty belly. Nothing blessed about the loss of ambition which comes from hopelessness and the downward spiral into self-destructive behavior. If the hungry, the poor, the sorrowing are blessed in today's word of Jesus it is not because there is anything good about their condition. It is just because and only because Jesus has come in God's name to them, to bring them into his company, make them his own and never to leave them. It is because of Jesus who joins them, not because of poverty, that the poor are blessed, the weeping comforted, the sad now glad.

There is a false spirituality, which has haunted Christianity; it can and still does misunderstand our text today. It imagines that we can or should set aside the most basic fact of natural life --as Aristotle the Greek philosopher famously said, "All by nature seek the good"-- and somehow prefer sorrow to gladness. It imagines that in this religious way we might buy our way into God's favor, say, by voluntarily choosing poverty, hunger and sorrow. Such deprivations signify, they imagine, how dear a price we are willing to pay in exchange for heavenly rewards just as they identify what is wrong with us as physical nature with its natural loves of laughter, well-being and pleasure. We can think of medieval monks leaving the world, for example, or scolding Puritans policing us, "Don't

drink , don't smoke, don't dance!" -- as if what is wrong with us is that we are physical beings with natural desire not angels. This is false "spirituality" so-called.

The body is not our problem but rather the trust of the heart: **Thus says the LORD**, in the words of Jeremiah: **Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD**. As Martin Luther discovered in studying texts like these in the Bible, our real problem is not that we are flesh which naturally enjoys pleasure and avoids pain, but that we beings of flesh and blood put our trust not in God who made us embodied beings but rather in our own selves, our muscle-power or our brain-power. Our real solution: **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**. Our real problem is that we do not trust this good Creator in our bodily needs, but in merely mortal wisdom, relying on the flesh as our strength. Our real problem is not that we love well-being, but that, turned away from the Lord, we also lovelessly turn away from the poor, the sorrowing, the sad – the very ones whose company Jesus makes and keeps.

Which are you? Are you among those blessed or those among upon whom the word of woe falls? The question is not whether you feel occasional pangs of conscience about those less fortunate, but about your very identity before God. Those medieval monks, who actually vowed and lived lives of poverty out of that misguided spirituality, nevertheless worked really hard to pay off their debts and earn their rewards. Nowadays

we write a token check to a good cause; is it chiefly to assuage feelings of guilt? This would not even be cheap grace. It's cheap law, as the holy law of God requires wholehearted love. At least those monks and Puritans of old thought heaven and God's favor were something they had to work for. By contrast modern people have an easy conscience: as Voltaire quipped, "Of course God forgives that's his job!". But in either case, even the law at its best, God's holy law, the penetrating preaching of a Jeremiah or the sword sharp division of blessing and woe from the lips of Jesus, still leaves us in bondage to self, preoccupied with self, trying to save our own skins, wanting to redeem our own reputations, still our own consciences. Whether you choose to write a check for the poor or takes vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, either way you are never really freed from self, free joyfully to join ranks with Jesus in the company of the poor, the hungry and sorrowing that he has made his own. Where to get that kind of freedom? freedom from self, freedom for God, freedom for love?

Brothers and sisters, no one in their right mind ever chooses hunger, poverty and sadness. But contemplate now something we would have never imagined, something astonishing, God's choice, not ours: God's choice in Jesus for the poor, not their poverty, for the hungry, not their hunger, for the sorrowing, not their sorrow, for you and me, not our sins and unbelief and lovelessness and despair, but nevertheless for you and me. In Jesus' preaching God asserts a royal claim, like a king returning to reclaim a usurped kingdom, property stolen from him by evil, rebellious powers. Jesus is this choice of God in action. He realizes God's choice and claim.

So! Will you let God exercise divine free choice and choose you in Jesus Christ, bind you and unite you to his Chosen One, along with all the other poor, hungry and sorrowing that are in his company, so that in your heart of hearts you agree with his word of blessing on you, and therefore with your lips and hands and daily living conform also to his corresponding judgment of woe against all whose strength is in the flesh? Consider this: before Christ comes into our lives we have no real choice; rather, we merrily go along with the world, which praises the beautiful people and looks in contempt on the disfigured. All our so-called choices for our own good are but variations on this same theme. We are not really very free at all. We buy into these worldly values and they come to dominate us.

But when Christ comes into our lives through the gospel we are confronted with the one true choice, on which our lives truly turn – the choice of God to show favor on the least and lowliest. Look, God is the Giver; *whatever* you have comes as a gift, so there really is nothing earthly on which to rely. So look and see instead what the whole Epiphany message of Christ's coming into our lives is saying: God's full and free favor falls on the earth here and now and is focused on Jesus, his beloved Son, who would also join us today and say: blessed are you my poor, you my hungry, you my sorrowing, if indeed I am in your midst and you have gathered into my keeping. In Jesus the Lord's year of jubilee is come, all debts are being cancelled. Prisoners are set free and debts are cancelled. Therefore now, only one thing matters. And that is not in the first place *your* choice, not even a great and sacrificial choice, but this amazing Choice *of God* for you poor, you hungering and sorrowing.

That is so, because God confirmed and vindicate his choice on Easter morn;
Christ who was made the poorest, the saddest, the hungriest of all, Christ reviled, mocked
and scorned, this “Christ in fact has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those
who have gone before.” Therefore it is so: Blessed are you poor, for yours is the
Kingdom of God, since Christ is alive not dead. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith
is futile and you are still in your sins... If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we
are of all people most to be pitied.” But Christ is risen and we live too, trusting in his
victory now in the body, on this earth, in solidarity with the poor, the hungry and the
sorrowing. His victory shall surely be our victory also, the victory of God, to defeat the
powers of sorrow, poverty and hunger once and for all, now by faith then by sight:
Blessed are you, yours is the kingdom of God, you will be filled, you will laugh.