

JEREMIAH 17:5-10
PSALM 1
I CORINTHIANS 15:12-20
LUKE 6:17-26

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 13, 2022; Year C

Bless Your Heart!

“Bless your heart!” Of all the phrases that are associated with the South, perhaps no other colloquialism more than **“bless your heart”** captures the essence, the quintessential expressiveness of polite southern speak, benign southern gentility. **“Bless your heart!”** Sadly, it is innocent, innocuous, comments like this one that have the unusual ability, the capacity, even the power, to sting with the sobering reminder of our dark past, haunting those of us who are sensitive about but proudly claim, remaining loyal to the best aspects of our southern heritage, despite knowing full well the damaging and disgusting dark side, the horrific aspects of our horridly lurid history, the immense and unending shame we earned the hard way and continue to carry like an anvil, a heavy burden to bear, as well we should. After all, we were on the wrong side of history, some still calling the “Uncivil War,” this war between the states, “The War of Northern aggression,” as defenders of the Confederacy affectionately call it. Yes, we continue to hold onto our grand nostalgia, massaging these mythic images, nurturing our fragile and insecure southern egos, complete with Camelot, sterile, sanitized pastoral images of antebellum days gone by, basking in the luxury of a picturesque Plantation, yes, thoughts of a bygone era in our country’s history, vividly stark reminders of ghostly, lazy, fat and happy landowners sitting under the shade of massive oak trees drinking homemade lemonade. Yes, all of it captured in that grandest epic novel *Gone with the Wind*, written by Margaret Mitchell, an Atlanta icon, and of course spawning a heroically portrayed flick in the subsequent and infamous nostalgically portrayed blockbuster movie by the same name.

Yes, this this book is the epitome of narrative fiction, mythology on steroids, just like *The DaVinci Code* or Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and yes, much like much of the Bible!

You see, in the South we have a subtle, a gently nuanced, way of getting our points across, of making our verbal jabs, invoking while masquerading a certain subdued reservation, yes, smiling smugly while reflecting a dignified aura, employing the politest persona, belying our true feelings, an expressively coy gentility hiding our true feelings and our subversive intentions. After all, it is all about subterfuge, or so I am learning in this age of conspiratorial nonsense! Yes, the phrase "bless your heart" is but one example among numerous colloquial southern expressions all timely employed when our objective is to be bitingly insulting, rudely cutting. I could tell you a few jokes, but they would not seem to fit in this genteel homiletical setting! When on the occasion we find the need to say "bless your heart" either directly to someone, or more fittingly, about someone else, because we tend to be the ultimate purveyors of gossip, sometimes walking and talking stereotypes, nosily conversing about an individual behind their back, what we are actually saying is something to the effect of "you are as dumb as a bucket of rocks, a stick, or a pile of goat excrement, and, yes, I cleaned up that last one for this genteel setting. I sense a theme developing here! **In other words, what I am trying to convey is that "bless your heart" is anything but complementary, never showing any empathetic or sympathetic emotion or allowing for or extending even a modicum of compassion, though definitely and insincerely faking a high degree of care, the least level of concern. Yes, it means that a poor victim who is perceived in every way ill-equipped or to be a downright complete idiot and utter fool, revealed to be hopelessly stupid on steroids, becomes the easiest and obvious target. And yes, all those adjectives are redundant and repetitive and all at the same time! No, "bless your heart" is not in the least a favorable thing to have said about any out-to-lunch, unaware, unsuspecting, person.**

Used in a sentence, “Bless his heart, he does really well at the buffet table considering he only has one tooth! It just doesn’t seem to slow him down in the least!” You get the drift!

I offer this outrageously bizarre introduction because today is all about blessings and curses, blessings and woes, the paradoxes and polarities we find primarily in our lections from Jeremiah and from Luke this morning. And to further massage this idea, ironically, “bless your heart” plays right into the theme I wish to develop because in some ways the content in these narratives is also perfectly befitting a game of make-believe, pretending to be something it is not, at its most transparent easily questionable truth. Our skepticism, our most serious and sincere doubt begs the question, raising concerns, “Is what these biblical affirmations appear to be really what they are?” In other words, the fair question from the outset of this sermon revolves around how in the world these blessings described in both Luke and Matthew are really blessings at all. They seem like opposites that strangely attract when juxtaposed against one another. From our perspective they come across as conflicted, looking anything like, everything but what they claim to be, the very curses or woes they supposedly contradict! Frankly, it is hard to tell the blessings from the curses in these narratives, hard to separate the wheat from the chaff, the blessings from the woes. And therein, in a nutshell, is our sticky wicket, our dilemma for this day and every day! So to give you a further hint where we are headed, exactly where we are going on our sermon journey today, when I read this prophecy from Jeremiah and especially these musings from Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, shall we call it the “plain” truth, the cousin story to the more familiar and expanded edition called the Sermon on the Mount in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, including of course what we affectionately call “The Beatitudes,” to be perfectly candid, as honest with these texts as I can be, I have trouble differentiating or delineating the blessings from the curses, the blessings from the woes. Unfortunately, they all seem a

blur, two sides of the same coin, having far more in common than whatever it is that supposedly makes them different. I mean think about it for a moment, who among us wants to be poor or poor in spirit, hungry or weeping with sorrow, despised, hated, and excluded, reviled and defamed? Really! Seriously! Yea, sign me up for the biblical equivalent of Elisha's much sought-after double portion! This is what I want in life each and every day, drudgery and torment, depression and disgust, dismay and despair, yes, a heaping, helping dose of all of it. This is no way to win friends and influence people, to invoke the light and airy theological naivete of Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuler, those proprietors and purveyors of the persuasive and proverbial Prosperity Gospel. They would be summarily appalled and offended at the notion of such. Quick, run for your lives! It is hard enough as it is to get people's attention regarding all things steeple. Who wants or needs all this doom and gloom, this drudgery masquerading as blessings? In this big, wide, postmodern world it is already almost impossible to get people to become even remotely interested in religion, much less to persuade people to come to church, to convince them that they might need it and might enjoy it. This is especially true for potential newbies, to get them even remotely interested in joining any organization dripping with institutional excess, to dare and suggest to them that it would be worth their while to turn aside and see this great sight. It is hard enough to get them here in the first place, but to get them to sign on the dotted line as a card-carrying member and actually agree to pony up some money to support said cause. It is indeed a tough row to hoe! The whole enterprise has become a lot like deciding to build a Cadillac dealership in an Amish farm community! Good luck with that! **So, just what gives in these ominous texts?**

Well, the first thing we have to do if we have any hope of making any sense whatsoever, and coming to peace with, finding any satisfactory resolution with these ancient words, is to examine them closely in

order to better understand their complicated context, for each narrative was written out of the crucible of a people facing the most challenging of extremely difficult days. Without bogging us down into too much minutiae, a short tutorial will suffice. Jeremiah lived and wrote during the height of some of the most tumultuous times to afflict the Israelites, prophesying after the chosen ones had been taken into exile at the hands of their Babylonian captors, a scenario that was all too familiar to this specially selected people of Yahweh their God, this former Hebrew tribe now long happily settled in their land of much promise. All the books of the Hebrew Bible, what we traditionally and insultingly call the Old Testament, were written either prior to the exile, pre-exilic, during the exile, exilic, or post-exilic, after the exile upon the Israelites' less-than-triumphant return to Zion, Jerusalem, the holy city. Jeremiah composed his words of warning and promise during the exile, metaphorically describing the horrific reality of their circumstances that was a continual presence, a companion that had unfortunately become their lot in life, marked by a life of persecution, torture and terror, curses and woes, all of which seemed to go unabated with no end in sight. They were living a here-we-go again plight. Unfortunately, this was not their first rodeo with **dispossession!** When I read the plight of the Israelites' predicaments, both in their bondage in Egypt and their dispossessed lives in Babylon, I am reminded of our own country's demonic history with an ongoing white nationalism, including those who share my southern roots all, of it theocratically perverse, a not-so-subtle flirtation with and cerebral embrace of racism, a history initially marred by our founding fathers and mothers, all of them willfully choosing to participate in the evil institution of slavery, a stain forever blotting our democracy that will surely never be completely eradicated or obliterated from the collective conscience of U. S. American citizenry, healing our land completely, a contagious social disease that seems to be spreading like wildfire, clearly on the rise, popularized once again by rearing its ugly and shameful head despite demonstrative vocal protestations to the

contrary, conveniently ignored by those who are obliviously selectively naïve or who suffer from a major case of selective amnesia. Really bad! This societal blight should never be forgotten, avoided or ignored! We must continue to name it! We must constantly recall it and keep it real, consistently keeping it fresh and green in our individual and collective civic consciousness so that we never forget, much less have the audacity to perversely perpetrate this flagrant disregard for human and civil rights in this twenty-first century, postmodern era. Yes, this plague once more is at the forefront of our news, feeding our civic awareness. We must never reenact these communal crimes against humanity! Despite the best, most concerted, efforts of purveyors of deniability like Florida governor Ron Deshameless, I mean, Desantis and others who revel in paranoid conspiracies fueled by heightened fear and anxiety, and driven by a hyper insecurity, the rightwing ramblings of a privileged white man who would gladly propagate what is a blatantly, demonstrably, false narrative—talk about fake news, alternative facts—anything but blindly and gladly sweep our history under the rug, pretending, symbolic of the Apostle Paul’s “powers and principalities,” that everything is just dandy, just fine, and in the immortal words of George W. Bush, swear that “the past is over,” good people will not be denied or deterred in the fight for social justice. Yes, like any preacher or prophet who proclaims, any biblical writer worth the salt in and of their words, and, of course, those to whom those words were spoken and to those to whom those words were written, then and now, we too are reminded that we are called to social justice, stirred to action, that we must speak truth to power, anytime, every time, all the time, no matter! Ironically, Jeremiah wound up living in Egypt and it is from that oddest of locations where he preached and prophesied, only two known converts to his name as a result of all his verbal salvos, a man named Baruch and an unnamed Ethiopian eunuch. Wow, some track record, some success ratio! What gives! For a prophet, he must have sucked as a preacher! None of these recollections add up at all, not in the least! Jeremiah’s message was a simple one, urging the Israelites to

keep their chins up and remain faithful, to trust in a God who surely would one day deliver them—de javou all over again, thank you Yogi Berra—and indeed, eventually brought that promise to pass, fulfilling this most fanciful, Pollyanna, some probably argued delusional, prophecy. Jeremiah’s prophesying was far more positive, far more optimistic than either Luke or Matthew’s blessing promises and cursing woes, a much more endearing message, a positive word of encouragement and hopefulness.

So, as we move to Luke and Matthew we read words that simply make you want to sing that old song, “Nobody likes me. Everybody hates me. I’m going to eat some worms.” Or my other favorite from the old Hee Haw show, since I have already soiled this sermon with some “southernese” colloquialisms. “Gloom, despair and agony of me! Deep dark depression, excessive misery! If it weren’t for bad luck, I’d have no luck at all! Gloom despair and agony on me!” And now we are ready to explore Luke’s most sobering images. Aren’t you glad you came today? The first thing that we must acknowledge is that neither Luke’s Sermon on the Plain or Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, including the long version in those most beautiful “Beattitudinal” phrases, yes, was poetic language that more than likely never, ever was uttered from the rabbinical lips of Jesus, a lingo not his own. These sayings no doubt had been around for quite a long time, long before Luke and Matthew plagiarized them, long before the birth and life of this man of history and mystery, prose revealing a most provocative vernacular, recorded for posterity by the early Church as it endured the worst of hardships, suffering miserably as did those faithful Israelite progenitors of the exilic period, inspiring Jeremiah’s rich vocabulary. Luke and Matthew are writing a sobering word against the backdrop of the horrors they were witnessing, using a writing style that put these sayings directly into the mouth of Jesus, making it appear that he indeed was the one who said them. Once again, Jerusalem, along with the second temple, a much humbler dwelling, had been given over to a ruthless conquest,

mercilessly thrust under siege, falling to their Roman occupiers in 70 CE. As with the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Scriptures, what we traditionally call the New Testament, can be divided into the time preceding this latest fall and the time following. While the Jews had long been subjected to their own persecutorial reality, the Christians were now meeting a similar and even much worse fate, facing countless agonizing atrocities, terrorized and tortured, persecuted and martyred, fed to wild beasts or burned alive, all for the fledgling faith. Out of this abject misery came the editorial opinions of Luke and Matthew, both of them writing at about the same time.

The pivotal question before all of us this morning is “just what do these textual dichotomies mean?” What does this conglomeration, this messy mix, of blessings and cursings and woes tell us, inform us about our lives? How do these ancient narratives of sacred quality interpret, inform and impact, our contemporary setting? Well, at the risk of being simplistic, something that I am not prone to do, something that does not come easily, naturally, readily, or willingly, I believe our life experience has taught us everything we need to know in interpreting and understanding these texts, yes, the very exact same things our forebears in the faith described here in holy writ in their experiences, their unique stories, what they learned at least more than two thousand years ago. Yes, our humanity is the commonality that transcends time! They discovered, in their continuous terror and torture, curses and woes, their perpetual persecution, their constant misery, often met with the fate of a horrific martyr’s death, that no matter the depth of their faith, the deepest level of their belief, that they were no more immune to the worst that life could offer than anyone else that might be afflicted with such horrendous luck. The same rules applied to their pagan adversaries, including those who exhibited no faith at all, or those who practiced a different brand. As Job learned the hard way, “the rain falls on the just and the unjust!” Life is life! As Forest Gump

declared, “Life is a box of chocolates!” In that box is good and bad, what the biblical writer called blessings and curses and woes. And yes, we twenty-first century postmodern progressives should know that full well, full stop, by now. Yes, we should know better! The slings and arrows of the most outrageous fortune are equally distributed, readily available to every human being of every stripe, no matter how good or bad they may be, “No matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey!” God plays no favorites when it comes to the order of the universe, the scientific realities under a steadfast rule we all by design live and move and have our being. Despite those who believe otherwise, the imaginary idea that somehow Christians are somehow exempt, protected, shielded from the painful side of whatever constitutes life’s machinations, praying that God would place a hedge around them because they are special, the Holy One passing over them just like what we read in the mythical story of the Passover as recorded in the Book of Exodus from the Hebrew Bible, Truly, we all know better by now. Experience has been a poignant and painful, very sobering, teacher. All of us have been privy to what we would consider unfair, unjust, and untoward in the most graphic of ways. Yes, bad things happen to good people! Yes indeed, because it does bear repeating, “The rain falls on the just and the unjust!” Excellent biblical wisdom! Yes, bad things can happen to the likes of you and me! Everyone has a story! I am not telling you anything new, nothing that you have not discovered or experienced before. Believing in God or following Jesus has nothing to do with getting a pass on the negative possibilities that very well may come our way. And yes, that means that even the most evil and vile among us, the most unworthy, can succeed, even thrive, and live a life that many would consider to be blest beyond all measure. Reality, just like truth, is not often kind but is a necessary word if we are to somehow understand and even somewhat accept the dark side of life’s misfortunes. Theologically speaking, even though you did not ask, the issue underlying all things related to God’s participation

in the world, God's interaction, the mysteries of good and evil, is found in a term called "theodicy."

Today's texts are a reminder that an authentic, genuine, faith, a belief based in integrity as an integrated, holistic, human being, has nothing to do with reward, with what we can get out of it or what God might give us in return for our faithfulness. We believe in God! We follow Jesus! We do these things because in our mind and in our life, according to our experience and our values, our belief system, we can do no other. Yes, we have found a key, a pathway for living that fulfills us to the brim and overflowing with a sense of grace, mercy, peace, all bathed in love and even in the midst of the worst hardship. Those who practice any modicum of what they pretend is an authentic, genuine, faith, a faith lacking in honesty and integrity, simply because they would like to inherit the eternal bliss of heaven and avoid the flames of hell's brimstone, have completely missed the point! The point is whatever amazing and miraculous Spirit of holy substance within us, that divine internal energy that inspires us to love at all costs, no matter, to be the best persons we can be, and to give and give and give, to offer ourselves sacrificially to others in the service of a God we believe has called us to make planet earth a better place, to make this world the most livable, hospitable, place it can be for all God's children, knowing deep down in our soul that everyone is a child of God, created in the divine image. I hope I have not burst anyone's naïve bubble today! This should not come as news at all, much less surprising, shocking news!

Perhaps the biggest key of all is found in a significant part of Jeremiah's prophecy we read today. After declaring that those who are blessed are those who trust in the Lord, the prophet boldly declares, "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.” In the vortex of the horrors of exile, during those darkest days, Jeremiah was imploring his people to be like a rock, solid in every way, to be a metronome—to use a musical metaphor—consistent no matter, to stand tall like the proudest tree, never bending, never wavering, even when we are at our most vulnerably compromised. It is not hard to use our imagination here in the north woods! We are emboldened by the Divine to stand tall in the proverbial saddle, to “mind the gap” as the Brits say, to be centered in the void or the vortex commensurate with all the negative challenges of life that interrupt our sanity when they sadly and tragically come our way, every presumed curse or woe, empowered to withstand the chaos as it is so articulately described in the opening salvos by the writer of Genesis as this wistful writer creatively imagined creation, reminding us humans that we have that same creative capacity or destructive power. After all, all of life, every breath we take, is a blessing, even if in disguise! Of course, some trees are cut down while others fall because of storms and other forms of attrition. Many forests are threatened, succumbing to the proliferation of either the black beetle in Canada, the bark beetle in California, or the aphid-like woolly adelgid in the great Smoky mountains, all exacerbated by climate change, new warmer weather patterns that allow them to not only survive, but to prosper and thrive. Yes, every metaphor, no matter how beautiful or esoteric, has its downfall! I could not help but think of the largesse of the massive trees here in the north woods and how amazing it is that they reach their potential with such a short growing season every year. It is a marathon, not a sprint! Something to consider every time we chop one down! Seeing them and living amongst their colossal canopies, nothing in this text is lost on any of us! Yes, all metaphors, even the best of them, have their breaking points, a place beyond which they cannot go and refuse to be stretched. But we get Jeremiah’s salient point, an observation that is as strong and viable now as it was on the day it was spoken and then on the day it was written. **Kyle Childress, a preacher friend of mine, writing for**

“Christian Century” magazine in 2007 tells a story from Wendell Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow*. Jayber, the main character, “works to come to terms with who he is. At midlife, after going through a crisis, he says ‘Now, finally, I really had lost all desire for change, every last twinge of the notion that I ought to get somewhere or make something of myself. I was what I was. ‘I will stand like a tree,’ I thought, ‘and be in myself as I am.’” Perhaps we have arrived, as we are prone to say, when we finally are able to be at peace with our world, in a world that is sorely lacking in peace, yes, even as it is, and especially finding contentment and peace within ourselves, accepting ourselves just as we are, yes, for who we are, even finding ways to embrace all the crazy that swirls around us, that even threatens our peaceable harmony. Oh, what a hard but glorious, gracious, thing to do!

Another writer notes that “In scripture, one superhero image of faith is a tree. In Psalm 1, a life fueled by God’s Word is as fruitful, prosperous, and resilient as a tree planted by streams of water. In our reading from Jeremiah, a person who trusts in the power of the LORD is like a tree planted by water with roots growing deep into a steady source of hydration. This tree is not afraid when heat comes; its leaves remain alive. This tree is not anxious when a drought arrives; it remains fruitful.” Ironically, Jesus was crucified on a tree, a symbol of evil, knotted and twisted after human will, yet even this wood reshaped as a cross would become a symbol of the power over the worst humanity has to offer, life over death, a transformation of unimaginable grace and glory. Eventually, as we read in the bizarre Book of Revelation, we find a tree of life flowing from the throne of God, a mythology speaking to God’s desire for a healing of the nations at a time when healing was almost absolutely unimaginable. Yes, a time just like our time, just like now! As this writer notes “trees symbolize a holy channel that faithfully stewards the power of God into the world. The image beckons us to grow deep roots in God’s grace and stretch the limbs of our lives wide

and far in love for our neighbor. . . . Our faith makes us superheroes of God, sharing in the power of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of reconciliation, healing, and new life. Like a tree, we are ever growing into this calling and channeling the power of God's love into our world." Well said! And I would add that we do all these amazing and wonderful things in the midst of all the things we classify as blessings, curses, or woes, with the ever-present reminder, that if it does not kill us, it indeed will make us stronger, just like a tree with a solid trunk! **Listen to a poem called "When I am Among the Trees" by Mary Oliver.**

**When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.**

**I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.**

**Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.**

**And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
Into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
With light, and to shine."**

Another writer asks, "Who among us doesn't adore and revere trees?" Celtic singer, songwriter Enya has an album called "The Memory of Trees!" I hope and pray this may never be so, that this

never comes to pass! The call of Jeremiah and thus we assume the call of God is to stand tall like a tree, stately, immovable against the prevailing tides of life's terror and torture, curses and woes, but swaying flexibly in the breeze, led by the prevailing winds of the holy and still speaking Spirit of God! As the scripture declares, in the final analysis not even the gates of whatever constitutes hell in this life will prevail against us! In the end, we are safe and secure in the loving arms of God, perhaps the best example of the kind of tree Jeremiah sought to describe in his powerful prophecy and the kind of tree that he and God would want us to be. Bless our hearts!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and has created each and every one of us a blessing, every breath we take and every day we live, a blessing indeed! Bless your heart! Amen and amen!