

JEREMIAH 29:1, 4-7 or II KINGS 5:1-3, 7-15c

PSALM 66:1-12 or PSALM 111

II TIMOTHY 2:8-15

LUKE 17:11-19

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 9, 2022; Year C

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Living the Good Life!

One of the things I love about Garrison Keillor's epic tale *Lake Wobegon Days*, a delightful parody depicting all things wonderfully and uniquely Norwegian, is that you cannot pick up this book without this novel putting a smile on your face. You cannot help but be put in a good mood when you read—insert extreme hyperbole here—the exciting adventures, or misadventures, characterizing the proud citizens of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, a fictional town from up around these northmost parts! I am always reminded of the deeply engrained Norwegian culture saturating my former home in Big Timber, Montana. I learned a lot! And one of the most endearing things about this fictional narrative is Keillor's creative language, the way he spins a phrase with what was obviously a benignly deadpanned tongue-in-cheek sarcastic playfulness. Who can forget some of the most memorable, now timeless, quotes from the classic novel which is based on Keillor's long-running Saturday radio show *A Prairie Home Companion* which brought the book to a much wider audience and introduced fans of all ages not only to the quirky characters but offering a window into much of the subtle nuance of Norwegian life. Lefsa or lutefisk anyone? Or, with the warm winter holidays approaching, how about a little Frisky Nosky Nogg, a wonderful chocolatey elixir? I can hear Keillor saying now as he began the weekly saga, "Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, my hometown, out there on the edge of the prairie." Perhaps like Eagle River, except a real-life town on the edge of a forest! And of course, who could forget the ending, "Welcome to Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average." By the way, I highly recommend Keillor's Christmas album, a CD called *Now It Is Christmas Again*, featuring the make-believe choir from Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church, the readings and songs capturing the essence of this imaginary small town, Norwegian enclave. The content carries feelings of quintessential small town American life, yes, distinctly Americana indeed, reminding the reader of what many call the "good life," places where time seems to be frozen like last week's snowfall—get ready—standing still as if in suspended animation, yes, the allure of Camelot days of wine and roses, salad days, free of anxiety and fear, stress and worry, all distress and misery, every derogatory threat to our peaceful happiness. It is certainly a place of myth and legend, an imaginary place that never really existed in the first place and only lives in the minds of our

most wistful and wishful thinking, our hoping and dreaming, a once-upon-a-time meets happily-ever-after that never was. As we all know, it is a nice place to visit even if none of us can ever go there! Even so, when all is said and done, in the final analysis, living the good life is something to which we all long to experience, if only briefly, something to which we daily aspire, that we desperately desire for ourselves and everyone else.

I have chosen to incorporate Keillor's creatively imaginative imagery this morning because when I read our lection from the Hebrew Bible in Jeremiah, the prophet's admonition serves as a reminder, that no matter our challenges and struggles, our difficulties or troubles, yes, life's infamous "slings and arrows," that are deeply embedded, intrinsically built within us, an innate, an inherent, ability to overcome, to bring out the best, to make the best, the most of every situation, no matter how dire they may be, yes, the ability, the probability, to appropriately over function, and to live life to its fullest. Yes, we are called to make the proverbial lemonade out of lemons, to find the roses amidst the thorns, to enjoy the cherries while avoiding the pits. Choose your favorite metaphor for life and living! Insert one here! We bend but do not break, never letting the worst or the worst of "them" ever get the best of us. Yes, it is easier said than done but therein is the challenge, an ultimate goal for each and every day we are blessed with breath, each day we choose to get out of bed, optimistically motivated to face the dawn of a new day with every horizon that rises before us. At the end of the day, we decide for ourselves! It is always up to us!

Surely these were the challenges confronting the faithful exiled remnant of Israel, the hostile dynamics at play back in the day, as Jeremiah observed from afar from his vista amidst the ruins that was Jerusalem, witnessing from his vantage point the lethargy of his once proud but now downtrodden people, their despondency and depression gripping them to the point of catatonic immobility, a people seemingly ready to give up all hope for liberation from bondage and to smell the intoxicating rarified aroma of freedom, forced to accept what they perceived to be their unfairly inflicted and most unfortunately horrific fate as they lived the life of the exiles, living a mere existence as Babylonian captives. My hunch is that the prophet discerned the need for a pep talk, a little cheer leading, some encouraging words, some language that would uplift and lighten the sullen mood of this people worn thin from conflict and strife, yes, including the indentured life. After all, there was more than enough probable cause, plenty of evidence to support, to justify, the civic discord rampant among the displaced Israelites. The fair question we are always left to ponder when we read these ancient texts, these weighty prophecies, sometimes encouraging and sometimes judgmental, is related to the questionable presence of divine influence. Were these words dictated or inspired by the Holy or were these the prejudicial perceptions of a propagandizing prophet, a not-so-veiled attempt by Jeremiah who was simply trying to prop up the fallen, putting stylus to papyrus, yes, the proverbial pen to paper. These are answers that, in full or in part, we will never know, in part or for sure! Perhaps the truth lies

somewhere hidden in the details of the texts, lurking in the grayest of textual nuance, somewhere between the lines, but in actuality residing somewhere in the middle or between the extremities, polarities presented as a perceptive probability in this kind of persuasive writing. Next week we will explore the whole idea of inspiration as we talk about the Bible and the way we approach, interpret and understand what many, if not most, of the faithful consider sacred scripture! Unapologetically cheap tease here! **And so, Jeremiah sends a letter to a small contingent of the survivors in Babylon, an epistle to the elders among them, who were supposedly continuing to offer their sage advice to those still living, yes, those who remained on site, left behind as a fortunate or lucky few who continued to hold out the slightest, the slimmest, the most remotest chance, maintaining a modicum of infinitesimal hope and found themselves upright and vertical! Jeremiah offers to them what was surely received and perceived as fanatical, surprising, no radical on steroids, shocking, advice, an admonishment that surely seemed nonsensical to a proud nation and people who sought desperately to not yield to the pressure and knuckle under the stress, the anxiety and fear confronting them as they went about their daily despair.** This tormented people were looking for an escape, real or imagined, looking to find even the most intolerable ways to accept their pathetic plight, to accommodate themselves to the pollution of their adversarial hosts, a captive people seeking to maintain long-established ritual and sacramental purity, along with their actual day-to-day, routine practices, striving desperately to preserve their compromised cleanliness against a persistently encroaching and pervasive and prevailing pollution.

The prophet Jeremiah had the audacity to tell them to plant and cultivate gardens and to eat the produce that literally came from unclean, foreign, soil. It made sense! After all, everyone has to eat! He then tells them to marry and have children, in the immortal words of the Priestly (P) writer of Genesis, to “be fruitful and multiply!” In other words, to have the courage to dare to boldly, bravely, bring children into this dead-end world in which they were unhappily inhabiting, just barely existing. Jeremiah tells them to find wives for the sons and husbands for the daughters, and we cannot help but wonder if he was including, perhaps even encouraging, advocating for the pagan Babylonians to supplement what in all likelihood was a very limited marital gene pool from what was left of the available Israelite tribe and clan! Race mixing! What a horrific thought for the purest of the pure! The prophet implored them to reproduce, to breed like gerbils, like there was no tomorrow, suck it up and do this seemingly repulsive thing so that this people will not only survive, but would thrive, would prosper, with no threat of this covenant remnant ever dwindling into oblivion, becoming a footnote in the annals of history, perhaps even relegated to its proverbial dustbin. Then comes the real shocker! Jeremiah admonishes them to promote the welfare of the city where they have been forced into exile! Yes, from Jeremiah’s lips to exilic ears! Yes, pray for your enemies. Sounds a lot like Jesus’ kind of stuff! Sounds a lot like the apostle Paul who demanded his constituents to pray for kings, rulers, and those in authority despite their oppression and occupation. It is not about them! It is never about them! It is about us!

It is always about us, who we choose to be, who we are as people anchored with integrity as the cornerstone, the foundation of our lives, faithful and otherwise. It is about our level of integration of thought and societal participation. Imagine the citizens of Ukraine being told to pray for Putin, or Iranian dissidents being told to pray for the fundamentalist Ayatollah, or the women of Afghanistan being told to pray for their oppressive Taliban overlords, or try this, a little closer to home, how about hosting a dinner party to celebrate the ideals weighing heavily in the seditious conspiracy theories by the insurrectionist Oath Keepers and Proud Boys, yes, the kind of guys you want to bring home to mamma. Or imagine a picnic among Israelis and Palestinians, indeed, fulfilling Isaiah's fanciful imagery of the lamb and lion lying down together, playing nice one with the other, "other" being the operative word! Or imagine Democrats being told to pray for Republicans and vice versa. Yes, that last one was a cheap shot in honor of all the lovingly gracious and endearingly unifying political advertisements that are flooding the airwaves, propaganda on steroids. Pick your favorite side or become your own version of Switzerland neutrality! You get my drift! I can only imagine how the elders of Israel in their Babylonian captivity received this information, hearing Jeremiah's nonsensical rambling babblings as anything but good news! I can picture these seasoned elders now having to swallow hard and report these words of the prophet, these prophetic words, to their younger colleagues. Surely this word went over with the biggest thud! Think of the worst food or drink imaginable, the lovely essence of tasty gruel. Yes, I am thinking a bucket of mayonnaise here! Pick your favorite worst! Surely, it was a difficult, a hard word to hear, much less swallow, taking a long time to soak into the collective conscience of a people who surely had already endured more than enough and were just plain over it! After all, enough is always enough!

Call Jeremiah's prophecy naïve, short-sighted, simplistic, or the kind of Pollyanna pabulum doled out by the smiling you-know-what prosperity, seed-faith salesmen and women who gleefully market, hawking their wares on the religious comedy channels. How does anyone manage to carve out a life and a living under the direst of circumstances, situations that were as bleak as the worst scenarios imaginable—think southwest Florida or Puerto Rico right now in real time—an outlook that could manifest nothing but the most abject gloom and doom. There is simply no way! To use a tired and worn-out cliché I have never used before now and frankly detest, Jeremiah was seeking to offer them, here it comes, a way out of no way! Groans allowed! Will probably never use again! All things considered, however, if we peel back the layers and take a deep breath, perhaps the way the ancients who first heard these words were required and intuitively managed to do, maybe we can begin to get the point, a sense of what the prophet was trying to convey.

Perhaps if we take a closer look, we can find a way to perceive the hopeful word, an encouraging word, the sacred hope Jeremiah sought to offer these miserable ones. No matter the challenges or complexities afforded us in this life, as long as we are above ground there

indeed is a survival gene inherent within us all, a desire to make things better, to be better, to live better. Yes, there is hope! There is always hope! In the words of Jim Valvano as he was dying of cancer back in the 1980s, “Don’t give up! Don’t ever give up!” It is sound and sage advice, words to live by and by which to order our steps, our days, and our lives, with every one of each we are blessed to have. Yes, this was the message from Jeremiah as he gave witness to the profundity of life, a testimony to the fact that no matter, life is worth the living as hard a pill as that sometimes is to swallow. When we get knocked down to the mat, we get right back up and keep fighting. Yes, it is innate within our divinely conspired DNA, part and parcel of who we are as created in the divine image, human beings and doings who have the spark of God planted within us. We cannot help but do otherwise!

In our Witness from the Gospels in Luke for today we read a story about Jesus and ten unnamed men who all share the same affliction, a skin disease the ancients call leprosy. Birds of a feather flock together! Back in the day it was imperative that those who suffered this debilitating illness keep their safe distance, that they clearly alert everyone within earshot as to their highly contagious condition. We have by now all experienced this awful dynamic to a small or large degree since the advent of COVID-19 on the world stage. Trust me, I got the memo! It literally came in the mail after I was formally, officially, diagnosed! Upon seeing Jesus from their safe vantage point, these ten infirmed men raised their voices loud enough for the rabbi to hear, “Jesus, Master, show us mercy!” Well, of course Jesus does what he always does, mister consistent, always at the ready, willing and able, he heals them on the spot, this time, in this specific instance, without using any of the magical, miraculous words we frequently read in other healing stories, the kind of familiar formula we tend to associate with the good rabbi, yes, his per usual *modus operandi*. He simply instructs them, “Go, show yourselves to the priests!” All were immediately, mysteriously, healed, cured of their affliction, in the proverbial twinkling of an eye. Of the ten who were healed in the nanosecond of eternity, only one thought to give pause and return to the source and give thanks, praising God for this amazingly blessed event that had been wrought in his terminal life. We are talking a ten percent return on this curative investment, this divinely inspired spiritual awakening! While the nine may not have noticed their unforgivable oversight, Jesus certainly did. The rabbi was well aware that they had indeed left out a most important aspect, a detail that should have never been left unattended, a primary component of this holy exchange, what was by all accounts as much a divine transaction as a physical one. Their literal ignorance, their egregious error of omission represented a blatant, a colossal, ginormous, failure to offer gratitude, a life-giving necessity for our living and moving and having our being, and yes, our doing.

This story is a reminder to all of us that gratitude always has its source in God’s excess, that it always wells up from our overflowing abundance, the gift of grace that is our abundant life. Gratitude is the gift of grace that keeps on giving! By its very virtue it cannot help but pay its

way forward, gloriously and graciously granted to the next beloved recipient! Saying “thank you” seems like such a small thing, taking minimal effort, though it was not asked or required, Jesus never making any quid pro quo ultimatums for his good deeds. Even so, a positive response, a profoundly grateful reaction, was certainly to be expected, well within the realm of normal, surely anticipated and justly warranted by those who had just received this rarest of rare gifts, a new lease on life, a life refreshed, renewed, restored, reformed in every conceivable way imaginable. We never are told if Jesus’ feelings were hurt! I wonder! We would be! We would feel slighted! After all, he was human! Of course, the dig in this episode in the Jesus story is the fact that the one who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan, complete with all the negative baggage, the derogatory residual, inextricably attached to those individuals who were perceived to be piously perverse, always the subject of ridicule, scorn, judgment, and revulsion. We read this story and are quick to recall the parable called the “Good Samaritan,” once again Jesus’ divine image of the great reversal, a reflection of the realm of God on earth as it is in heaven, a core value in the gospel, yes, a foundational cornerstone, here proudly on display for all to see and experience, yes universally uplifting the last, least, and lowly, putting those at the end of the line at the front, making the lesser the greatest. As Jesus is reported to have asked, “No one returned to praise God except this foreigner?”

Perhaps the word we genuinely if not desperately need to hear today, the sobering message we are implored to receive from the prophet Jeremiah and the rabbi Jesus is that it is never too late to give thanks, to be authentically thankful, that even in the midst of all that can and does go wrong, that there is still much to invoke our gratitude, to stir our thanksgiving. There is still an abundance from which to draw our satisfaction and our joy. In all things there is always much that urges, compels, us to give our utmost and greatest rejoicing, to illicit from deep within our being an unvarnished and unbridled praise of God, the most articulate thankfulness, the deepest appreciation for life with all its overflowing abundance and destitute sparsity, yes, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Frankly, as I read these texts I see thankfulness, ultimate gratitude, as part of our calling as people who believe, as people of faith who put their trust in God and yes, even in one another despite our flaws, any warts we might have as frail and fragile human beings. No, it does not mean that we do not acknowledge life’s pitfalls, the presence of evil incarnate, the wickedness that unfortunately appears to be germane, inherent or innate within the very human, human being, despite the presence of a divine spirit, a divine soul, that is a part of our makeup, our DNA. That would be denial, or as I like to say, “delusional deniability!” While we are called to name what is wrong, either with us or even with someone else when that is warranted, or with the world, a global village that is overflowing with problematical reality, even so, with that being acknowledged as reality, we are not required to spend our time, our precious lives, wallowing in such debilitating misery. Every now and then we need to take a breath, a deep breath, to breathe in and out, to inhale and exhale, the goodness that is God’s loving graciousness. We cannot and

will not overcome, divide and conquer our challenging fears and anxieties, if we choose to give in to the paths of least resistance or the least common denominators that threaten to sink us into the mire when we cheaply settle for quick, easy solutions, simple ways out of complex problems. We can never yield to whatever confines and constricts us, the traps that like quicksand pull us down into life's muck, allowing, even encouraging, us to wallow in self-pity and continually ask of God and the universe, constantly complaining with the always ever-present potential and possibility of "why me" as we hopelessly throw our hands up in defeat. Life is not a lottery even when its randomness makes it look like it is! Objects in the rearview mirror! The answer to that kind of hypothetical question, that rhetorical inquiry, is always easily answered, "Why not me?" **Wallowing in the nadir of life's pitfalls is never a viable option! No, it is never a solution! Never, never, never! Period!**

So even as we anticipate the upcoming season of Thanksgiving, it is not too early to get a head start on our gratitude. Take a look all around you, at all the picturesque scenery surrounding us, the lovely landscape of our lives, along with each beautiful soul in this beloved faith community, family and friends, all reflecting the best of God's image in the human creation. Take it deeply within your being! It is never too late to stop and give thanks to God and to those you cherish and who travel with you, accompanying your footsteps on this marvelous journey we call life. Jeremiah was so intuitively brilliant, so sensitive, upon receiving these sad reports about the debilitating behavior affecting and afflicting his people, no doubt picturing the look in their melancholy eyes, perceiving that they were simply went through the motions of living, all the while waiting, some no doubt wanting, to die, idly waiting for their number to be called telling them their time on this hell-on-earth was done. Yes, he was compelled to respond to the horror of it all! Yes, there was a much-needed intervention at stake, and with God's help, Jeremiah knew the answer, he knew the salve they needed, metaphorically speaking, the locally famous balm in Gilead they desperately desired, and the solution was right there with them all along. Yes, they found it within themselves, just as it is with each and every one of us. It was a word to them then and to us now that they get up off their backsides, whatever constituted a mat of depression, death, and dying, and to begin living once again, resume a lifestyle befitting those who perceived themselves to still be God's chosen. Yes, it is the call to all of us whenever we struggle, whenever life gets us down and in the dumps.

So on this day, individually and corporately, as persons who believe in something of a greater mystery far beyond our limited, finite, selves, as people who place our faith in a transcendent God of mysterious awe and wonder, let us pause and give thanks, offer our best gratitude, for this blessed life we are blessed to live, rejoicing in all the good, even when it hides from us, playing a game of hide and seek that frustrates us and yes, leaves us questioning ourselves, one another, and our God. In the words of the Psalmist today, "Shout joyfully to God, all the earth! Sing praises to the glory of God's name! Make glorious God's praise . . . All the earth worships you, sings praises to you, sings praises to your name!"

Indeed, all creation groans while crying out glad tidings of great joy and thanksgiving to the Holy, even as the rocks bear witness, a testimony declaring that all is well, that goodness and grace abounds like a cup overflowing, the very essence of a graciously loving God! Let us join in that chorus, resembling, yes, echoing, those glad remarks! Yes, life is good! We only get one! This is the good life! It is what we make of it! Don't ever forget it! Keep your eyes on the prize!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and indeed offers us the good life, the best life imaginable! Amen and amen.