

How Do We Stay Focused On God?

C- Epiphany 6: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

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Adult Sermon:

How do we stay focused on God, and have a blessed relationship with God, throughout our life journey? And what are the things that might distract us? That may interfere with our relationship with God? Those are some of the questions and issues I think I'm hearing in our readings for today. But they are both complicated.

Jeremiah says, "**Cursed** are those who **trust** in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD." But "**blessed** are those who **trust** in the Lord." (Jer. 17:5, 7) What does it mean to "trust in mere mortals" as oppose to "trust in the Lord"? According to Jeremiah, those who trust in mere mortals will end up being like a shrub in the desert, and will find no relief in times of drought. (Jer. 17:6) But if we do truly trust in the LORD, we will be like a tree planted next to a stream, we will always have plenty of water. (Jer. 17:8)

What's the difference between "trusting in mere mortals" and "trusting in the LORD"? One way to think about it is that's it not good to trust only in mortals. It may be OK and helpful to some extent to trust mortals, but we also need and **must** trust even more in God.

Here's another way to think about this. If we see God as Love, as the Way of Love, then trusting in the Lord is trusting in Love. If we see someone who is actively loving others, who is letting God's love flow through them, we can see them as "trusting in the Lord." And if we see someone who is **not focused on love**, not focused on loving their family, friends, neighbors, strangers, we can see them focused on living in a selfish, self-centered, Godless world.

At the end of our reading, Jeremiah, speaking for God, says: "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." (Jer. 17:10) "According to their **ways** according to the **fruit of their doings.**" God looks into our mind and our heart to see what "our ways" are and what the true "**fruit**" of our actions really are.

So, if we trust in and follow the LORD, if we follow the Way of Love, serving and helping our neighbors, we will be like a tree next to a stream, bearing real fruit. But if we only trust in the ways of the world, only trust mere mortals, and if we use our strength and gifts and resources to focus on ourselves, to build power and wealth for ourselves, we are distracted from God, and the Way of Love, . . . we will be living in the desert.

In our Gospel reading from Luke, in Jesus' sermon on the plain, he seems to have a focus similar to Jeremiah. Jesus says **blessed** are you who are **poor**, blessed you who are **hungry**, blessed are you who **weep**, blessed are you when people **hate** you, **exclude** you, **revile** you, **defame** you. (Luke 6:20-23) Jesus is preaching to the people who were actually following him, they showed up for his sermon on the plain. And then Jesus says, "But woe to you who are **rich**," those with plenty of **food**, the ones with time and money to have **fun** the ones who others were **bragging** about. These are the people who were probably not following and not listening to Jesus. (Luke 6:24-26)

Does this mean that all the poor will be saved by Jesus, and the rich won't? I don't think so. I hope not. I think what Jesus is really saying is that it is, actually, a **lot harder** for the wealthy and the privileged, like many of us, to follow Jesus and truly follow the Jesus Way of Love. Why?

First the rich are easily **distracted** by all our stuff. We too often are separated from the hungry and the needy with things like fences and gated communities and wealthy neighborhoods. And we are much less likely to know what it's like to be hungry, and to have empathy for those who are. It's just harder for us who are blessed by good jobs nice homes, safe neighborhoods, to notice, to empathize with, to pay attention to those who are suffering.

I think that might be why Jesus says, "Woe to you who are rich, Woe to you who are full now, Woe to you who are laughing now, Woe to you when all speak well of you." We are so easily distracted and misled by wealth and possessions and power. We often lose sight of the Way of Love.

I think this is connected to what I see as one of the major distortions of Christianity in our world. If our focus is primarily on "**believing** in Jesus" so when we die, we can go to heaven, as oppose to actually **following** the Way of Jesus, the **Way of Love**, then we can focus more on our wealth, and enjoy our privileges, and ignore those who are suffering in our world, and still be confident we are going to Heaven.

I have been blessed by the generous salary you pay me, I could afford to buy a nice house, live in a nice neighborhood, pay for my kids' college education, take nice vacations.

But I am also blessed by having to manage my **discretionary account**. My discretionary account is money you have specifically donated to Rec to help the poor and needy. I use it on your behalf, to help the needy buy groceries, pay rent, buy medications. Ironically, as I was in the office writing this sermon, I had 4 needy people come asking for help. I have been blessed because I often have to meet with those who are struggling and need assistance. I can't ignore them. I am made very much aware of the many, thousands of people, who are poor and hungry and homeless in my city.

Running my discretionary account has probably changed my ministry. It is complicated, to decide who to help, and how much to give, but it has been a blessing.

Paying attention to and helping the needy is a challenge for most of us, and for the Episcopal tradition. Many Episcopalians are rich or upper middle class, like me. We can be easily isolated from the poor and the needy in the world, which makes it easier to ignore them.

This is not just an Episcopalian problem. This has been happening for thousands of years. A couple of thousand years ago when the Gospel of Luke was written, Jesus was addressing this issue, saying, “Woe to the rich, Woe to those who have all the food they need, Woe to those who are having so much fun.” And a thousand years or so before Jesus, Jeremiah seems to be addressing the same issue.

Our wealth and privilege has always been able to separate us from the Way of Love, unless we are willing to wake up and pay attention and let God’s love flow through us.

When is the last time you did something to help someone who was struggling? When we do reach out and try to help someone who is struggling, we are letting the love of Jesus, flow through us. It’s not easy. It’s often messy and confusing at times. But, according to Jesus, and Luke, if we do so, we will be blessed.

I think what **Jesus** and **Jeremiah** are saying is: if we want to be truly blessed by God, we **have to be focused** on loving and serving our neighbors. It’s not enough to just **believe** that Jesus died on the cross for my sins so I can go to heaven. We are called by Jesus to let go of our focus on ourselves, our wealth and privilege, and focus instead on our Love: Loving God and loving our neighbors.

I think what Jesus is saying is that we are not really “believing” in Jesus or God if we are not following the Jesus and God Way of Love.

Amen.