

“Reading Between The Lines”

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

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, February 17, 2019
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Notice the crowd gathered around Jesus in the Sermon on the Plain (it's in Luke's gospel, chapter six). They are expectant, *for power came out from him*. Like a good shepherd, he blesses the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated because they are his followers. They will be filled; they will laugh; they will rejoice in heaven. Good news!

But woe to the rich, woe to the satisfied, woe to those who laugh, woe to the popular, for they have received their consolation, they will be hungry, they will mourn and weep, and their popularity will lead to ruin. These cautionary words are good news, too.

Here in Jesus words we find a word of comfort (blessed are you) and a word of warning (woe to you) for which we can thank God. We can thank God because when life breaks us, God heals us. And we can thank God because when our world orbits only around ourselves, Jesus reminds us that human strength is not sufficient, but God's strength is.

Jesus comforts the afflicted. He afflicts the comfortable. Jesus always has a way of appearing in scripture speaking the truth in love, walking with the poor, and standing toe to toe with those in power inviting them into a healing relationship with those who need a friend. Jesus is all about our loving God by finding ways to love and to be in authentic relationship with our near and far neighbors.

This is a main theme in scripture. The young prophet Jeremiah puts it this way: Trust God, not people. Those focused on God will flourish and grow (17:5). Those who put their focus elsewhere will wither.

As I read the annual report of our church's ministries, I wondered where our congregation has put its trust. I like what I see, but when one reads the report, it helps to read between the lines. Allow me these comments:

1.) The Finance Team report gives a good snapshot of our numbers, but it doesn't tell the story of the people who pledged a little more than they thought they could afford because they wanted to step out in faith. They did, and they were not disappointed.

2.) Nor does the financial report tell you about the joy a little girl felt when the church gave her her very own Bible. The cost of that Bible was covered by *your* generosity. She'll treasure that Bible for the rest of her life. She'll turn to it when she is bullied in middle school. She'll read the Psalms when she falls in love with poetry in high school. She'll take it to college. She'll read its underlined stories to her children. She'll remember how Mr. Rob and Mrs. Joyce stood up for her on that day in church, and she'll want the same thing for her children. When she's old and dies, her old, grown children will look in that Bible to find some of her favorite passages for the preacher to mention in her funeral sermon.

3.) The Finance report doesn't spell out that our church budget paid for the seeds that yielded 8-foot sunflowers towering in our church flowerbed by the alley. Our church budget paid emergency rental assistance many times. Our church budget paid for choir music, donut holes, photo copier toner, and after school supplies for at-risk fifth graders in the DREAM House after school program. That's *your money* at work. Blessed are you who share. Woe to you who do not; *you are missing out*. I'm glad our church tries to be a sharing place, a caring place, a challenging place, a giving place. We are, I think, *faithful* in the eyes of God even though sometimes we may not be *successful* in the eyes of the world.

- 4.) Again, the financial report doesn't tell you how hard that small committee works pinching pennies. They're favorite chorus about new ministries is, "How are we going to pay for that?" They are often the first to see (and sometimes the last) that Jesus not only multiplies loaves and fishes, he melts hearts and multiplies the generosity of formerly stingy people. We can afford it because, by the grace of God, you pay for it.
- 5.) You have a report in your packet from the Human Resources Committee. You don't see on those pages how tenderly they work caring for your paid staff. Nor do you see the motion they made to the Session encouraging your Session to speed the day when no one is hired here for anything less than \$15/hour.
- 6.) The HR report doesn't tell you how your staff is such a faithful, hardworking team. I see it every day. They make me look good, and I need all the help I can get in the good-looks department.
- 7.) The Worship Team reports they help plan and execute myriad services of worship. You have to read between the lines to see how old people are coming back to worship, new people are finding welcome, children—sometimes squirming—are being nurtured in our always- solid pews, and how God continues to be in the business of changing lives.
- 8.) The Contemporary Worship Committee, the Traditional Music, and the Children, Youth, and Family reports mention eating, singing, and learning. These are things not to be read about, but lived. If you've missed any of this last year, be wiser this year and—as the Psalmist says—*taste and see that the LORD is good*.
- 9.) Mention is made in the report of the wildly successful Trunk or Treat event, but no mention is made about the grandmother who couldn't come into Centennial Hall for a hot dinner on a cold night because her wheel chair couldn't make it down the steps. *With God's help, that won't be a problem next Halloween.*
- 10.) You'll find mention of things like Sholem Fest, International Taste of First Pres, and "The Big Event." These events seem so small on the page, but were, in fact, bursting-at-the-seams exciting. At Sholem Fest, Eric Corbin was the biggest kid in the swimming pool.
- 11.) Nowhere in the report are gatherings at the Jarling Custard Cup mentioned. but they've happened. I've had sweet meetings there with the Session and Congregational Care Deacons and old church members and potential church members.
- 12.) Nor does the report mention that it snowed on every Sunday afternoon in April.
- 13.) The report does not mention the trip a few of us made in the church van to Kemmerer Village where I kissed a real horse. They use horses at Kemmerer to help vulnerable children gain self-confidence and learn something of God's love. It's an amazing place. We support it.
- 14.) Nothing is said about what happens in the church library where the prayer group meets monthly. Nothing is mentioned about that because their holy work is confidential. Only God knows. Thank God for these pray-ers.
- 15.) This report underscores how our church serves children, adults, and members who are homebound. We reach out to neighbors. We give away baby cribs, financial grants to area mission agencies, and popcorn to people in Westside Park. We care about Central Africans who are new to this country; some worship on Sundays with us; some worship together on Saturday nights. We care about people in the community who need help with English as a second language. Sure, we have our prejudices and ideas of "our" turf, but we try, nevertheless, to be a place of welcome for all. We care about the earth. We are a pollinator pocket for Monarch butterflies. We nurture relationships with folk working hard to stay clean and sober. We continue to deepen relationships with friends in Cuba, Central Africa, Indonesia, Pakistan.
- 16.) This report intimates that we are reaching out to the world with the hands of Jesus.

You pay for this, pray for this, and make it happen, by the grace of God, with your laughter, energy, resources, tears, and hard, faithful work. Thank you. Thanks be to God for you.

The young prophet Jeremiah leads me to believe that so long as we stay focused on God's work, we will flourish. And when we heed Jesus' words of comfort *and* correction, we can look to the future with hope.

AMEN.