Westminster Sermon – Tall and Resolute
Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 17:5-10, Luke 6:17-26
Sunday, February 16, 2025
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Our first scripture reading is Jeremiah 17:5-10. In today's reading this ancient prophet concurs with the psalmist that a happy or blessed life is one that trusts in God. The metaphors of a tree planted by water and a shrub in the dessert provide vivid imagery for those who trust in God and those who trust in themselves. Hear now, God's Holy Word.

Thus says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. They shall be like a shrub in the desert and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

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. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it? 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. Amen.

Today's gospel reading is found in Luke 6:17-26. Just as Matthew has shaped the more familiar Sermon on the Mount, Luke's parallel Sermon on the Plain challenges the faith community to whom he writes. Jesus' teachings in Luke are for those who have committed themselves to follow Christ. The four beatitudes are contrasted with four woes and emphasize, as Jeremiah did, the importance of putting one's trust in God. Hear now, what the Spirit is saying

Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear Jesus and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch Jesus, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Tall and Resolute

The text: 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. Jeremiah 17:7-8

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, may we live lives of faith that are able to stand tall and bend with grace when confronted with life's adversities. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

When Peter and I arrived home this past New Year's Day following a few days in Chicago, we were disheartened to discover that a very tall and majestic oak tree planted along the shore had fallen across our cove on Lake Springfield. There was something unnerving about this sight for me. The death of this tall and resolute tree had multiple meanings as I reflected on the recent passing of beloved Westminster members, my pending retirement, and the political landscape. Yet, along with feeling a strong sense of loss and sorrow, I also experienced an inner strength and calm. I thought about the sermon I would be preaching in a few weeks on Jeremiah 17.

A few days later, Dale Rogers walked into my study and asked if I was familiar with Maya Angelou's poem "When Great Trees Fall." I was not. In the poem, American memoirist, poet, and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou explores the theme of loss and uses the imagery of mighty trees falling to symbolize the passing of influential people whose presence and strength once shaped the world.

When great trees fall, rocks on distant hills shudder, lions hunker down in tall grasses, and even elephants lumber after safety. When great trees fall in forests, small things recoil into silence, their senses eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die, the air around us becomes light, rare, sterile. We breathe, briefly. Our eyes, briefly, see with a hurtful clarity. Our memory, suddenly sharpened, examines, gnaws on kind words unsaid, promised walks never taken.

Great souls die and our reality, bound to them, takes leave of us. Our souls, dependent upon their nurture, now shrink, wizened. Our minds, formed and informed by their radiance, fall away. We are not so much maddened as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of dark, cold caves.

And when great souls die, after a period peace blooms, slowly and always irregularly. Spaces fill with a kind of soothing electric vibration. Our senses, restored, never to be the same, whisper to us. They existed. They existed. We can be. Be and be better. For they existed.

Yes, indeed, we find strength and inspiration in those influential people who have gone before us, who have shaped our world, and enriched our lives.

The prophet Jeremiah also uses the metaphor of a tree to describe one who trusts in God. The ancient Hebrews believed that those grounded in faith thrive and persevere. They have flexibility, inner joy, and a sense of well-being, even when things are difficult, even when inspiration is sparce, even when devastating news is received. This sense of well-being grows out of a trust and connectedness with God.

The Rev. Dr. Clint McCann (who was Westminster's 2019 Bay Weekend Speaker) reflects on the meaning of this metaphor in the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary. He concludes that what the tree imagery highlights is not primarily the aspect of fruitfulness, of doing, but rather, the importance of a stable rootedness, of being. The roots are in precisely the proper place—beside water, which represents God's life-giving instruction. It is deep rootedness that allows the tree to withstand during times of drought and storm, something we have all experienced. People who trust in God find an inner strength to sustain their lives under the most challenging of circumstances because they are connected to the source of life.

On the other hand, according to Jeremiah, those who are like chaff or a shrub in the dessert are those who live as if they are accountable to or responsible for no one. The irresponsible life is the person with no depth, substance, or respect for other people and who moves with the wind in whatever direction it blows.

The woes in Luke's beatitudes reflect Jeremiah's woe as Jesus challenges and calls out those who live as if they are accountable to no one: the rich who give nothing to the poor, the full who share no food with the hungry, those who laugh thoughtlessly in the presence of those who weep, and those for whom people speak well who risk nothing in advocating for those who are hated and persecuted. These spiritually parched and empty lives are like a shrub in the desert.

Luke's beatitudes remind us that from God's point of view those who seem to be prospering may not be and those who seem to be suffering may be blessed. This is the good news from the One who joined us in our humanity, who climbed the cross and embraced the tree of life: the poor will be rich, the hungry will be full, and those who weep will rejoice.
Years ago, following World War II, a short poem was found carved on a cellar wall in Cologne, Germany, where many Jews hid during the Holocaust. Amid this dark and desolate time of Nazi occupation and despite the horrors they were experiencing, someone had the faith and the courage to carve the following poem into the wall.

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.
I believe in love even when I cannot feel it.
I believe in God even when God is silent.

These simple, yet profound words are a powerful message of hope, faith, and resilience in the face of extreme cruelty and adversity. They illuminate a rooted, grounded faith in God. Mark Miller, a musician and lecturer at Yale's Institute of Sacred Music composed an anthem based on this poem in 2012 which he dedicated to his late sister, a great tre who had fallen too young. Mark says: "I composed this anthem as a testament to the power of love over institutionalized hate, whether it comes from government or religion."

When darkness surrounds us, when love evades us, when God seems silent, and when great trees fall, may we persist in faith, serve the poor, feed the hungry, support the persecuted, and console those who weep. By the grace of God, may we stand tall and resolute. Amen.