

It Depends

Luke 6:17-26, Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1

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Church of the New Covenant

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Our scriptures today are among the many “Hang in there” passages spread throughout scripture. Jeremiah and the psalm refer to trials and tribulations a little less directly than the Luke passage, where Jesus cuts right to it, naming some of the ways in which people suffer: poverty, hunger, grief, and persecution.

All these passages offer encouragement to people who are in difficult circumstances. This is all to the good; however, there is a danger hidden, if not in the passages themselves, in reading their reassuring words too lightly and receiving their encouragement too easily.

There is another caution we should also heed. If we read scripture fully open to how it might address the very real trials or dangers we face, we need to be ready to hear some challenging things. That is not to say we won't find the comfort or encouragement we need. What often happens, though, is that God's Word in scripture names our realities in ways different than we understand them. What God then offers as comfort may, for a while, be for us an additional challenge – or even a reproach.

Of the trials Jesus names in his series of four “Blessings”, two regularly receive ample thunder from the pulpit and genuine humane response through congregational ministries: poverty and hunger. For today, then, I want to focus on what Word there may be for us in the weeping, and in the experience of exclusion.

We human beings have, since our very beginnings, never been trusting souls. We have always been territorial, because, when we lived on the savannahs, if we could not guarantee sufficient fruit, corn or meat for our families and our tribes we would not have survived as a species. When some of us chased a zebra or a mammoth into lands occupied by another tribe we were invariably attacked. If members of another tribe entered our turf, we were compelled to fight them off.

When first we figured out that natural barriers like rivers or woods or mountain ranges could impede intruders, we learned how to patrol them for the defense of our turf and our resources. It didn't take us long to learn how to pile up stones to build walls, and then carve stones to erect fortresses. And, in addition to hunting parties, we organized war parties.

For all of our defensive ingenuity we have also learned that there are advantages to forming alliances with neighboring tribes, because some may have more zebras than they need, and some more corn or guavas or water or thatching grasses. We found we each have something we could receive from the other. We discovered a blessed relief in the simple exchange of trust.

But there is always someone to spoil the party. Still other tribes needed some of what we have, or they may just have wanted more of what they already had. They assembled larger war parties, or developed better weapons or learned how to ride horses. They swept in and killed us and our children, destroyed our huts or our tents or even our forts, and overran our lands.

Because we continually fear that we might not have enough, we build walls around what we have to keep others from getting it. We wall out those whom we deem to be "other". We bar them from our neighborhoods and fight to keep them out of our homelands.

Down through the millennia, as our civilization has become more sophisticated, our perception of and treatment of those we deem to be *other* has remained brutishly primitive.

We thought we had made some progress in the giddy days when the Berlin Wall came down. But we're back at it, building walls again.

There is an article coming out today by the journalist and historian Gwynne Dyer. Referring to Robert Frost's famous poem (with the ironic title "Mending Wall") he writes:

If good fences make good neighbors, then the world is experiencing an unprecedented outbreak of neighborliness. They used to wall cities. Now they wall whole countries.

The latest country to start building a wall -- sorry, a "security fence" -- is Thailand, which has just announced plans to build a physical barrier along ... its frontier with Malaysia. The goal, says Bangkok, is to stop "terrorists" from crossing into Thailand's restive Muslim-majority southern provinces. ...

India is well on the way to being walled (except along the Himalayas, where the mountains do the job for free). The barrier along its 3,000-km border with Pakistan is largely complete

The fence that [China] is building along its own frontier with North Korea is a precautionary measure to stop an immense wave of refugees from entering if the regime in Pyongyang collapses.

The majority of the new walls springing up around the world are there to stop either terrorist attacks or illegal immigration, but sometimes they also serve as a unilateral way of defining a country's desired borders. ...

[This is] true of the wall that Israel is building through the occupied West Bank. ... it penetrates deep into the Palestinian territories at a number of points to leave Jewish settlement blocs on the Israeli side, and it cuts off (Arab) East Jerusalem from the West Bank entirely.

Pakistan is building a 2,400-km fence with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan has built a fence along its border with Tadzhikistan, the United Arab Emirates is erecting a barrier along its frontier with Oman, and Kuwait is upgrading its existing ... wall along the Iraqi frontier. But the most impressive barriers are certainly around Saudi Arabia, [where] the highest priority now is to get a high-tech barrier built along the 900-km border with Iraq.

"If and when Iraq fragments, there's going to be a lot of people heading south," said Nawaf Obaid, head of the Saudi National Security Assessment Project, "and that is when we have to be prepared."

[Here, in our homeland,] President George Bush has now been authorized by Congress to build a fence along ... the Mexican border.

(http://www.gwynnedyer.net/articles/Gwynne%20Dyer%20article_%20%20A%20World%20of%20Walls.txt)

The federal government, the state of Georgia and other states are, as we speak, enacting harsh laws designed to keep aliens out, or send them out if they find a way inside of our walls.

The walls we build do more than exclude other people from whatever it is we have deemed so valuable. Our tendency towards exclusion causes real injury to people, physically, economically and spiritually. The walls we build not only hurt, they kill. No border guards that I know of patrol without guns. No homeland security department that I know of operates without lethal force.

Although in our present political climate it doesn't make sense, Jesus is calling us to take the part of all who are walled out. "Blessed are *you* when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile and defame you." Jesus is calling us to the task of tearing down walls and building instead the welcoming homeland he calls the Kingdom of God.

When he said, "Blessed are you" – even in the midst of our suffering – he was promising a change, a "still more excellent way."

I heard an interesting story about a church that works very hard at being a welcoming community. They have a vibrant ministry among the homeless of their neighborhood, part of which is providing them hot meals in the church dining hall. They have shone within their denomination as a beacon of inclusion of lesbian and gay, bisexual and transgendered persons in all of their ministries and leadership roles.

Among their gifts is a tradition of good music. One day a homeless person started showing up regularly in the choir. She sang pretty well, but she was often disruptive during rehearsals. Some choir members who had been there a long time, and for whom music was a particularly fulfilling way of serving their church, became very upset. Rehearsals became very tense.

Those most upset were some of the men, and so the director, we'll call him John, met with them to hear their concerns. During the conversation he helped them remember how they – and he – had felt, being gay, when they first joined the church. They were anxious at that time about being rejected

by the church, but instead found themselves genuinely welcome. Now they had an opportunity to show the same compassion they had received by finding ways to be welcoming to the new member.

Jesus promised that all this would change. If you are poor, or hungry, or weeping, or if you are the subject of hatred and rejection, you should rejoice. All this *will change*, for this is not God's vision of the way life should be. Right now the world is standing on its head. Everything that is supposed to be up has been put down. Everything that is *currently* on top is going to come down. God wants this world to stand up right.

Whoever is suffering from economic injustice or from the unequal distribution of food resources, whoever now weeps because they have been kept out of the lands of plenty, who have been denied the milk of human kindness and the honey of true justice, have reason now not just to smile but to *leap for joy!* For God is moving even now to make all things new.

For the loser now
Will be later to win
[and]
The first one now will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'

There will come a day when all God's children will have a seat at the table. Human beings *can* learn to live together in peace. We *can* remember how to love one another. We *can* begin to break down the walls we slave so frantically to build, and welcome all people into the one homeland, whose security is in the unity of peoples not in the divisions among them.

We can do this. We *can* do this. We can do this with God's help, and only with God's help. And here is how.

In his discourse of blessings and woes, Jesus goes on beyond what we have read today: "I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also."

To anyone who believes in fortresses, this is completely insane and absolutely stupid. They believe only the weak will lie down and let themselves be robbed and beaten and overrun. What such a person doesn't

understand is that Jesus isn't asking us to lie down. He's telling us to stand up. Stand up when your enemy hates you and tell them they are loved. Stand up to pray for those who curse or abuse or strike you, and tell them to stop, and keep telling them and remain standing until they use up all their slings and arrows and exhaust their pent-up hatred, and fall, weeping, to the ground around you.

Then tell them again that they are loved by God and reach out your hand to lift them up. Tell them that because they are now weeping along with us, they too are blessed. They and we -- all of us -- can stand up together and begin once again to laugh.

Standing up like this is an enormous challenge. To human understanding it is simply impossible.

Our readings from Jeremiah and from the Psalms remind us that such an enormous undertaking depends upon faith. They provide for us an image of perseverance: a tree.

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. (Jer 17)

When I admire a tree, for example one of the great pecans in our yard, I see the thickness and power of its trunk. I marvel at the strength and complexity of its branches, the lush green of its leaves, and I delight in the breadth of its shade. I am amazed by its generosity as it nearly carpets the ground with nuts in the fall. What I often overlook, however, is the incredible root system that not only draws in the nutrients for its growth, but holds it up and holds it in place when the storms come.

I remember how surprised I was as a boy, when I read one of those "All About" books about trees, and I first saw a diagram of a typical tree and its root system. The caption read something like, "There is as much of the tree underground as there is above it."

We who trust in God's vision for human community "shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out [our] roots by the stream." The roots we send

out are our faith in God. The waters of the stream are the river of God's love, and the earth into which we extend our roots is the very power of God. It is upon and within this ground that we stand. We depend upon God – and God depends upon us – to build that welcoming community known as the kingdom of God.