

Goodness
Sunday, February 13, 2022
The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Rev. Patrick C. Ward
Jeremiah 17: 5-10 and Luke 6:17-26

“For power came out from him and healed all of them...”
In the name of God, from whom all blessing flow.

AMEN.

It’s December 23, 1971. And a ninth-grader, Perry Hildebrandt, has a question that has been obsessing him. His father is an associate minister at a prosperous and liberal parish in suburban Chicago, and just now Perry finds himself, without his parents, at a holiday party for all of the local clergy. Perry, the lone teen in a room full of his father’s colleagues, is further emboldened by the two cups of glögg, a mysterious steaming holiday punch that he has just guzzled furtively in a back hallway.

Perry sidles up to the town’s rabbi and Lutheran pastor. “Can goodness ever be its own reward? Or does it always serve some personal instrumentality?”

The two adults exchange silent glances.

“My question,” Perry continues “is whether we can ever escape our own selfishness? Even if you bring God in, and make him the measure of goodness, the person who worships and obeys him still wants something for himself. He enjoys the feeling of being righteous, or he wants eternal life, or what have you. If you are smart enough to think about it, there’s always some selfish angle.”

The two adults in the next minutes, and to their credit, and take up Perry’s question seriously. The rabbi offers that there is only one measure of righteousness, in his tradition: “Do you celebrate God and obey his commandments?” The Lutheran pastor offers that in his tradition, faith in Christ redeems us and without accepting God’s grace we’re “lost in a sea of second guessing out own motives.”

But what if I never find God, or he never finds me?” Perry wants to know. His voice is rising and all of the adults in the room have grown quiet.

“I think we’ve touched on the main points,” offers the pastor. “Is anyone else ready for cookies?”

The party’s host intercedes and tries to move Perry out of the room but his energy is by now escalating. “Was I boring you? Did my questions seem childish?”

“You’re all saved,” he finally says loudly. “Do you think I enjoy being damned?”

In the now-hushed living room, Perry sees twenty pairs of eyes fixed on him. “I’m doing the best I can!” he sobs.

Blessed are you who weep now...

I wonder what the Jesus we meet this morning in Luke’s gospel would have to say to Perry. His question after all, is not boring and is the opposite of childish. Perry, and the scene I’ve just shared with you, are at the heart of *Crossroads*, a recent novel by Jonathan Franzen that takes place mostly on this one December day.¹ *Crossroads* is about people – Perry and the other members of his family – trying to be good, and it’s also about the stories we tell ourselves – the images we consciously or unconsciously project and the justifications we may sometimes submit when we are *not* good.

¹ Franzen, Jonathan, *Crossroads* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021) pps. 253-257

The episode of Perry and the local pastors, the Christmas party gone careening off the rails, suggests to me the teenaged Jesus disputing with his elders in the temple.²

And his obsession with goodness and selfishness, with salvation and damnation, are part of what Jeremiah and Jesus are taking up in our hearing today – these blessings and curses. So what are we being shown?

If you were with us last week, you'll recall that we are still in Galilee, at the very beginning of Jesus' adult ministry. He has told his first followers, after the miraculous catch, that they will now fish for people.³

The following verses are crowded with accomplishment. He heals a leper⁴ and a paralytic⁵ and also a man with a withered hand.⁶ He eats with tax collectors at a great banquet in the house of Levi,⁷ and eloquently silences those who accuse him of offending sabbath propriety.⁸

² Luke 2:41-52

³ Luke 5:1-11

⁴ Luke 5:13

⁵ Luke 5:25

⁶ Luke 6:8

⁷ Luke 5:28

⁸ Luke 6:5

He's incurring resentment from those in authority, as he did in his hometown, because he's reminding all as he goes that they have abandoned or contorted the ancient teachings of the Jewish prophets.⁹ "Don't tell anyone," he has said the healed leper in a puzzling aside.¹⁰

The insistence on reticence, the unwillingness to promote – which is common to the other gospels as well¹¹ – often strikes us as puzzling, coming from one who would be launching a revolutionary movement. But the point is one that would perhaps make sense to Jonathan Franzen's teenager. The Jesus we have met in these Epiphany readings is not constructing a traditional power base, making his own reputation the point. Whatever this movement is to be about, it will not be about traditional status markers, or power, or influence. He's already concerned about the twelve coagulating into a smug and self-righteous band of conventionally prosperous strivers. Jeremiah, in words Jesus probably knew himself, cautions us this morning about "making mere flesh their strength"¹² and turning away from our common creator.

⁹ Luke 4:24

¹⁰ Luke 5:14

¹¹ See as examples Mark 1:44; 8:30, Matthew 16:20

¹² Jeremiah 17:5

Jesus heals in part to end isolation and restore people to community in the care of that creator. And the calling of the twelve, which occasions his sermon this morning, signals renewed community as well.

I so often take these blessings and curses so personally -- As I do its first cousin, Matthew's Sermon on the Mount -- that it's easy to forget that the "you" in Jesus' teaching is almost always a plural, that these blessings and curses are not intended as personal to-do lists but are the characteristics of the God he is calling his disciples, and us, into. In this context, the selfish motivations that Perry is concerned about, or my own vanity or wanting to be thought well of, are givens. It's the power and saving gift of Christ to love us even as he reminds us that we are built for better.

Already in Luke's gospel, Mary's Magnificat¹³ and the Baptist's preaching¹⁴ have told us that the powers which enslave and oppress will be toppled, that the rough places will be made smooth. This Sermon on the Plain extends that promise. Disparities of wealth, of food security, of status and regard and reputation and credential and perceived righteousness – are the rough places the sermon on the plain seeks to smooth. The blessings and curses are

¹³ Luke 1:46

¹⁴ Luke 3:3-6

less, I think, about condemning and consigning than they are about inviting his followers to live in a new way.

He will continue and expand this invitation next week as the sermon continues. What good is it to love only those who love you in return?¹⁵ If that's where you draw the line, you haven't grown beyond transaction and consumption. And patterns of transaction and consumption are what keep us apart, one from another. What does it feel like to love without reward? To do good without carrying the expectation of recompense? To begin to live without concern for your personal reputation?

Here at Trinity, our Children's minister, Cathy Portlock Pacitto, regularly encourages our church school students to "Do something good, in secret." What does that feel like, she wants to know, from grade schoolers who are already absorbing the dynamic of action and reward, of evaluation and grading, of reputation and condemnation, that will persist and accelerate as they grow.

Do something good, in secret. Does that feel, somehow, like freedom? *"For power came out from him and healed all of them..."*

¹⁵ Luke 6:32