



*Sugar for the Soul*

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

*Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, Sunday, February 17th, 2019*

*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*

*The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.*

*Text: Blessed are those who trust in the Lord for they shall be like trees planted near a stream.*

*(Jeremiah 17:7&8)*

Blessings and woes. I like blessings. I'm not so fond of woes. They scare me. A variation of today's lesson also appears in Matthew's gospel as a part of the Sermon on the Mount. It begins that sermon with what is commonly called the "Beatitudes"--the blessings. I like those better. I like to be blessed. I don't like to be judged. Please, don't judge me.

The gospel lesson assigned for today in the common lectionary is Luke's version of Jesus' teaching, and it contains uncomfortable contrasts between the "blessings" and the "woes." I believe that we are often tempted to "tame" the teaching the teachings of Jesus, especially when they challenge us. Such is the case with today's lesson. We are sorely tempted to take the sting out of Jesus' words and comfort ourselves by saying that there is some kind of virtue in poverty. But if you ever experienced poverty, or uncomfortable want, or even mild want, for that matter, you know that poverty is not a virtue. There is nothing virtuous in poverty. No one aspires to poverty. Poverty is not something that we wish for our children.

I think that the times we are surrounded by plenty we try to ease our conscience by saying that the poor are somehow "closer to God" than the rest of us. After all, didn't Jesus himself say the poor are "blessed." But if they are "closer" to God it is because God is all they have to hang on to.

In today's gospel lesson Jesus did not commend poverty or hunger, or want. But neither did He condemn wealth. Rather he challenged us to take a closer look at our spiritual health in light of our wealth--for we are wealthy by the world's standard. Jesus invited us to think about the real source of security. What really makes us secure?

I believe that we have a gnawing hunger within our very being named "Security." Its alias is "Desire." We constantly seek ways to satisfy this hunger. Advertisers know this and feed our soul hunger. They tempt us with "sugar for the soul" which may satisfy us now but ultimately leaves craving more.

I will give you an example of what I am talking about. In her book *My Turn* the late Ruth Bell Graham told the story of a time when her son, Ned, was at the age when he wanted a bicycle more than anything. He had been playing with his friend Joel Baker, and he wanted a bicycle just like Joel's. His father, Billy Graham told him to wait until Christmas but Christmas was such a long time away. Ned shared his lament with Joel. Joel decided to lend Ned his bike for a week. In the course of that week Ned realized that Joel's bike would be too small for him by Christmas. So, he upped the ante. Now he had to have a larger ten-speed bike.

But even the love affair didn't last until Christmas! In the mail appeared the annual Sears & Roebuck Christmas catalog. Some of you are old enough to remember the excitement of receiving the Sears & Roebuck Christmas catalog. It was a world of wonder and a source of many a child's "wish list". Well, in the catalog Ned saw the "perfect" bike. It had a banana seat, three-speed stick shift, and butterfly handlebars--some of you remember those--and slicks! It was every young boy's dream! But Christmas was still a couple of months away!<sup>1</sup> I do not know if that was the bicycle that he settled on or how long it satisfied him, but the "things" of this world do not satisfy. They are "sugar for the soul". And this is where the "woes" come into play.

We feel financially insecure and constantly build "bigger barns."<sup>2</sup> We save for a "rainy day" but we can't recognize a "rainy day" even when we are standing in knee high in water. We spend our lives chasing "enough" but "enough" is always just beyond our reach. We say that we are not rich or wealthy because we believe that rich people always have ten percent more than we have. That's the problem with thing; they are with shiny objects that lead us down paths of distraction and destruction. This story is as old as humanity, the Garden of Eden, and older than the Odyssey, with the hypnotizing song of the Sirens.

In contrast to this, God wants us to be rooted in a faith that can sustain us, even in a time of hardship and famine. Jeremiah contrasted those who put their trust in themselves and in this world saying that they are like desert plants withering on salt plains. Those who trust in the Lord are like trees planted near a free flowing stream, sinking deep roots and producing sweet fruit).

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Bell Graham, "Bicycle Prayers", *My Turn*, c.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:16-21

The Psalmist sang of the “happiness” of living in God’s shadow. (I like to use the word “sing” rather than “said” for two reasons; one, the Psalms were written as song, and secondly, there is an unquenchable power in music and song. Let me write the song, a Scottish covenanter said, and I will lead the nation.)

“Happiness,” Pamela Coutre wrote<sup>3</sup> is complex and not easily achieved. Happiness or blessedness is not found in facades, goods, achievements, or accolades. Happiness is an “inside job.” It is found in a contented heart. Abraham Lincoln was once asked about an unhappy neighbor who was moving to a new community. “Do you think he’ll be any happier there?” someone asked Lincoln. “Well,” Lincoln replied, “I reckon that he’ll be as happy as he makes up his mind to be.”

Woes are transformed into blessings in the spiritual disciplines of worship, prayer, fellowship, stewardship and mission.

Happy are those whose delight is in the Lord.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord for they shall be like trees planted near a stream.

Where have you planted your life.?

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Pamela Coutre, *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions 2019*, The Upper Room, February 16, c. 2019