Sermons at Christ Church

Be One Body in Christ, Belonging to Each Other

Epiphany VI
The Reverend Emmanuel Mercer

"They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither, everything they do shall prosper," said the Psalmist. I love the part that says that they, the righteous, are like trees planted by streams of water. The tree is constantly being fed by the water the flows down the stream. The tree flourishes. The tree bears fruit. The leaves are always green, even in the middle of winter. The tree stands strong because it is constantly fed by water. The question this morning is, what feeds you? What nourishes you? What sustains you?

St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians provides us with some response, he says that if Christ had not been raised from the dead, our faith would have been in vain. According to Paul, our faith in the God of Jesus Christ, rises or falls on the basis of the one act of God that changed the human story, and assured us that God is trustworthy. The resurrection feeds our faith, nourishes our faith and sustains our faith.

That is why the words of Jesus, the resurrected one are so important, they too feed us, nourish us and sustain us-both in good times and the not so good times. More than that, they provide us with a pathway to human fulfillment.

In today's gospel, Jesus stood on a level place with a multitude of people from all over to hear the good news of God's love, to be healed by him and to be cured of their unclean spirits. According to Luke, everyone wanted to touch him because the power that came out of him healed their brokenness and made them whole.

Looking at the gathered crowd, Jesus pronounced blessings. Blessed are you. He says:

Blessed are you who are poor,
"Blessed are you who are hungry now,
"Blessed are you who weep now,
"Blessed are you when people hate you.

Blessed are you.

These days we misconstrue blessed with material wealth. The more you have, the more you are thought to be blessed, thus making the poor and destitute feel a sense of abandonment by God. But to be blessed is very different-to be blessed is to be overwhelmed with the presence and abundance of God.

To be blessed is to be aware of where your provision comes from. To be blessed is to know and accept that someone other than yourself provides for you, and that it doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor-you are blessed because you depend on God. It doesn't matter whether you are hungry or well-fed because your sustenance comes from God. It doesn't matter whether you are weeping or laughing because weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning. It doesn't matter whether you are ostracized or not because you know who it is that loves you unconditionally. To be blessed is to appreciate the fragility of life and understand that situations can change at any moment.

To be blessed is to be dependent on God like the tree which stands by the water. To be blessed is one of power made manifest through weakness-it is when I am weak that I am strong because I know where my strength comes from. To be blessed is to seek contentment, it is to feel fully satisfied irrespective of your circumstances. To be blessed is to know that the kingdom of God belongs to those who have nothing except God.

There's a story of two separate gardens. Each garden had its unique character. All are invited to walk around the garden and enjoy the many fruits and vegetables that grow in each. Everyone can walk in those two gardens-none is immune from the character of each garden.

Epiphany reveals the two gardens, two paths-my way or God's way, my garden or God's garden. There's a song by Frank Sinatra called *My Way*, which became one of the popular songs of all time.

In the song, Frank sings:

And now, the end is near
And so I face the final curtain
My friend, I'll say it clear
I'll state my case, of which I'm certain
I've lived a life that's full
I traveled each and every highway
And more, much more than this, I did it my way

For what is a man, what has he got
If not himself, then he has naught
To say the things he truly feels
And not the words of one who kneels
The record shows I took the blows
And did it my way
Yes, it was my way

No wonder the song is popular because the inherent appeal is I did it *My Way*. We derive some satisfaction from the idea that I did it, and I did it the way I wanted to do it, counting on my own strength and abilities, thus elevating our desire for self-sufficiency. I did it my way. That is the attraction but it also courts the woes that Jesus pronounces.

In the Old Testament reading, the prophet Jeremiah isn't happy. He sees the distress in which Judah finds itself, and cannot believe that the leadership is not trusting God, but is intent on doing it my way in the face of the approaching calamity by King Nebuchadnezzar. The prophet is angry because he knows that those who trust in the Lord are like trees planted by water, and that Judah cannot possibly abandon God, approach the situation its way and expect to survive. You cannot do it your way and expect to survive.

In that same way, you and I cannot refuse to delight in the word of God and expect to bring about the kingdom of God. For God's kingdom to come alive, we have to align our lives with God's plan for the world, we have to find joy in the plan that seeks to overthrows the world as is, for the sake of the world that God intends. We have to delight in the word that feeds our souls, nourishes our bodies and sustains us even in adversity.

In the midst of the blessings, Jesus speaks of woe:

"But woe to you who are rich,
"Woe to you who are full now,
"Woe to you who are laughing now,
"Woe to you when all speak well of you

Woe to you who are rich because you place your dependency on your privilege. Woe to you who are full because your indifference keeps others hungry. Woe to you who are laughing because your sense of entitlement is destructive. Woe to you who welcome praise because it affirms your sense of accomplishment for doing it your way. Woe to you who are the beneficiaries of the systems that perpetrate inequity, poverty, hunger, homelessness and discontent. You have had your fill of what you wrongly assume feeds you, sustains you and nourishes you.

Remember, the metaphor of a tree that sits by the water isn't nourished by itself, nor has the tree any control over the water that feeds it. The tree thrives simply because of where it sits. And because of where it sits, it never lacks. So really, the question is not whether you can sit, the question is where do you sit? In which garden do you sit? Who do you count on to feed, nourish, and sustain you?

From the gospel story, we get the sense that riches, power and privilege have the potential to separate us from God and from our neighbors. That is why the message of the gospel is imperative, not to some, but to all because the good news orients all toward God.

Someone once said we suffer from what has rightly been called the Garden of Eden syndrome. The syndrome is that God placed us in the Garden of Eden and invited us to partake of the fruit without labor. However, we have forgotten that we are no longer in the Garden of Eden, and that the divine instruction was to walk into the Garden of Gethsemane.

Remember, there is a contrast between events in the Garden of Eden and in the Garden of Gethsemane. ***Not your way, but mine*** was the essence of Adam and Eve's response to God. In the Garden of Gethsemane, we hear ***Not my way, but yours.*** This marks the shift from self-indulgence to self-denial, from selfishness to selflessness.

It wasn't surprising that Frank's daughter, Tina Sinatra, said that her father later came to hate the song because he realized that it was self-serving and self-indulgent.

Jesus stands at a level place, we see together the poor and rich, the hungry and full, those weeping and laughing, the rejected and accepted, all can see, all can hear the Rabbi lift up the lowly by challenging the powerful to a new image of God. We can hear the Rabbi, as Verna Dozier said, provide us with a vision of a new possibility of human life rooted in an ancient understanding of God.

Who it is that feeds you, nourishes and sustains you? Our task is to hear and delight in God's word, and to discover from it how to respond to God's invitation to feed, nourish and sustain others-the powerless, destitute, poor and the neglected with the faith we have found in Jesus Christ.

Remember, it is through God's word that we come to understand that the path to blessedness is love in all its forms, shapes and sizes. Tomorrow is Valentine's Day. May you be filled with the love that lightens up your faith in Jesus Christ.

Amen.