

Sermon, Epiphany 6C, Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1, Luke 6:17-26 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

When I was growing up, my maternal grandparents lived in a senior community called the Beatitudes. There were different living possibilities in the Beatitudes: garden apartments, which my grandparents lived in: two bedrooms, one bath with a kitchen and patio. Another section had apartments with a communal dining room so you wouldn't have to cook. Then there was the Care Center, which even as a child I understood was the dreaded area that no one wanted to go to, even before my grandpa went there a few months before he died. At the Care Center you only had a bedroom, and maybe had to share that room, and the TV was always on.

When I hear the word "Beatitudes" I still think first about that place in Phoenix before I think about the biblical beatitudes. Beatitudes mean blessings, and we find a list of biblical beatitudes both in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and Luke's Sermon on the Plain. In Matthew there are three more blessings than there are in Luke, and in Luke there are woes running parallel to the blessings. In Year C of the Sunday cycle of readings we focus on the Gospel of Luke as well as readings from the Old Testament the prophets, which are appropriate because the prophets in the Old Testament were kind of judgmental, and Luke's bit more judgmental than Matthew.

In the Beatitudes community in Phoenix, your stage of health determined what part of the campus in which you resided. When we read Luke's beatitudes, our life stage might affect how we hear them. For example, the last time these readings showed up, in 2019, I felt condemned by them. Everything in my life was going well. I loved my work here at St. David's. My writing life was growing in exciting ways. "Cancer" and "diagnosis" were words that happened to family members and parishioners, not to me personally, and while I had knew the word pandemic I had had never experienced one.

Three years later I hear the blessings differently, more consolingly, and even so I know that I am not the first person Jesus would comfort by any stretch of the imagination. Passages like this one remind us that God and Jesus have a preferential option for the poor. Matthew's Gospel softens the first beatitude a bit, from "blessed are you who are poor" to "Blessed are the poor in spirit." With the latter, most of us rationalize that we could be included at times, but if Jesus is talking about the actual poor, then he's not talking about us.

Jesus is talking about the literal poor. This does not mean that Jesus does not love you, but we need to read the Bible with open eyes and seek our places in it.

Right now in Bible study we are reading the book of Exodus, and I've noticed that I'm uncomfortable with the way God is portrayed and even the way the Israelites are portrayed. I don't want the Israelites to "plunder" the Egyptians on their way out. I want the good guys to be good guys all the time. I don't want God to so clearly prefer the Israelites over the Egyptians. I want God to show God loves everyone, even the Egyptians.

But God was clearly on the side of the enslaved, on the side of those who were oppressed. God was against Pharaoh. God saw how 450 years of slavery benefitted the Egyptians. My discomfort show me that I still have a long way to grow as a Christian and as a white woman of privilege who has long benefitted from systems that oppressed others.

When I think about the Beatitudes now—that is, that place in Phoenix—I think about how both of my grandparents lived through the influenza pandemic of 1918 through 1920. I never thought about asking them about it when they were alive. I asked them about the two world wars, and I asked my grandma if she was a flapper, but I never even thought about them surviving that pandemic. How did they cope? Did they wear cloth masks? My grandmother would have been in school then: how did it affect her experience? I didn't think to ask them because of my own stage in life. A pandemic was not on my radar screen. Now it is, and I want their wisdom in this area.

When we read the Bible, the context of when it was written is only one thing we bring to the text. We also bring our own stage of life and our own experiences. We read the same stories here in church on a three-year cycle, and if you read carefully you will discover something new every time. Maybe it will be one word, like the word “plunder” for me in the Exodus reading in Bible study last week. Or maybe you will see something a little differently because you are reading in a pandemic, or after you've had cancer, or after you've had a child, or after you've lost your spouse.

Our readings of the Bible may change, and the translation may change, but the Bible itself does not change, and God does not change. Our understandings of God may change, but God is constant, steadfast. Two of the readings today, from Jeremiah and Psalm 1, reference trees planted by water. When trees are planted by water their roots tap into that moisture, and even in times of drought, they are fed and can survive.

What did you bring with you to church this morning? Do you feel weary and oppressed after all that you have been through in the past two years? Do you feel blessed? Do you hear yourself in the woes?

No matter what you bring to the text, how can you tap into the living water of Jesus that is at our roots no matter what we are going through?