

Yr. C, Epiphany 6
February 17, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1423 Words

Lessons: Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-26

There was a store in my hometown that was filled with the smell of life. It was filled with the fresh aroma of grains and seeds. The store was called “Still & Williams Feed & Seed.” It was uphill from the center of town, but worth the effort of peddling your bicycle to breathe in some of that freshness.

Still & Williams provided feed for the flocks and herds near Barnwell, and seed for farmers trying to make a living out of our sandy, lowcountry soil. The customers at Still & Williams were hard-working people. Even a boy who did not grow up on a farm could see that as plain as day.

The ancient prophet, Jeremiah, had a message for people who made *their* living by the land. “Be careful who you trust,” he said. “Cursed are those of you who invest all your hope in mere mortals. They will be like shrubs in the desert.” Anybody who’s been in the Judean desert knows how precarious those odds are.

I can hear the warning of Jeremiah as if it was the sage advice of one of those farmers at Still & Williams, an old man with deep crevices in his brow. It pays to listen to the voices of wisdom and experience. It pays to listen to the voices of those who are *not* trying to sell you something.

Jeremiah also offered a *promising word* alongside his warning. “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust *is* the Lord. *They* shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out roots by the stream.”

So, what does it mean to put your trust in the Lord? What does it mean to place *your confidence* in an invisible, silent, abiding Presence who is such a mystery? I can hear the promise of Jeremiah as if it were an encouraging promise from an old farmer, handing a seedling of a tree to a boy, and saying, “Plant this in a good place, and see what happens.”

An old farmer does not have to explain the mystery of how plants grow and bear fruit in order for it to happen. The wise farmer has learned to trust what is invisible...silent...and abiding. Neither the farmer *nor the prophet* has to explain it at all. They just have to pass it on. They just have to tell the truth, unpopular as it so often is.

Dear people, we are all given a tree in this life, and we all get to choose—day by day—where we want to plant it. For goodness sake, plant it near the water. Plant it beside the invisible, silent, abiding Well of life. If you do this, you don’t have to fear when the heat comes. If you do this, your leaves will stay green. If you do this, you will bear much fruit.

The Psalmist echoed this wisdom of Jeremiah in the deserts of Palestine. He knew—as we do—what wicked counsel sounds like. He knew—as we do—what scornful speech sounds like. He knew—as we do—what is wrong according to the Law of love.

The Psalmist celebrates the delight of those who place their trust in the ways of God...in the ways of love. Those who delight in the ways of God will resist the wicked. Those who delight in the ways of God will reject the scornful. And they will grow up “like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season with leaves that do not wither.”

Dear people, all we get is one tree in this life, but we *do get to choose*—day by day—where we want to plant it. For goodness sake, plant it near the streams of water. For *goodness* sake, resist the proud and reject the scornful. For goodness sake, trust the way of love. If you do this, you will bear fruit in due season with leaves that do not wither.

St. Paul once wrote a letter to people who were doubting the whole resurrection idea. We heard it this morning. The thing I love about Paul's answer to their doubts is how he used *a farmer's wisdom* to comfort the people.

Every one of the Jewish farmers in that Corinthian congregation knew that you present *the very first fruits of your harvest* back to God as a thank offering...a *thanksgiving*. You do this because it's the *right thing*—always and everywhere—to give thanks to God for all the invisible, silent, abiding mystery that makes our life (and our harvests) possible!

We also present our first fruits as a bold statement of trust...confidence...and hope that there will be plenty of abundance yet to come. Sometimes you and I sing it like this: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow..." This is a thankful statement, and it is also a bold statement of trust...confidence...and hope.

Well, St. Paul takes this idea of giving 'first fruits' to God, and he flips it around. He says that actually God has given *us* the first fruits by raising Jesus Christ from the dead. How weird is that? God has made the thank offering *for us*! God has made a bold statement of trust...confidence...and hope *in us*.

Dear people, we all get our own tree in this life, and we get to choose—day by day—where we want to plant it. For goodness sake, plant it near the Source of this life. Plant it near the place where the first fruits are just a thankful sample of all that is yet to come.

And this brings us out to the level ground, standing in the midst of that great crowd who came from all over to hear Jesus. Unfortunately, he's not making a bit of sense.

Blessed are the poor? I don't think so. Blessed are the hungry? No. Blessed are those who mourn? Please. Blessed are the excluded, reviled, and defamed. What *is* he talking about?

It didn't make sense to me until I heard those dreadful woes which he spoke next. Woe to you who are rich...which includes all of us in this 21st century world of widespread poverty. Woe to you who are full...which is every one of us compared with the hundreds of millions of people who go to bed hungry every night. Woe to you who are laughing...which is all of us who live in *the most* entertainment-saturated culture in the history of the world.

The only comfort I can find in the Good News we heard this morning is the *possibility* that Jesus is speaking—not with condemnation, but rather with wisdom—the wisdom of a farmer and a prophet. Maybe Jesus is forecasting the inevitability of change. Maybe Jesus is predicting the inevitability of hard times and harsh conditions we all have to face. I hope Jesus is just warning us to be careful who—or what—we trust.

You see, the popular wisdom—back then *and now*—is that we can trust our money and those who promise us more of it. The popular wisdom—back then and now—is that we can trust our hoarding of resources, even when it deprives others. The popular wisdom—back then and now—is that we can trust our entertaining distractions to take our minds off of the world's problems.

Yet, Jesus is cautioning us that the poor *already know better* than this. The people who are hungry, they know better than this. The afflicted, they also know better than this. All these people *already know* that there is no substitute for planting your tree beside the Source of life. Those who have lived with scarcity have already learned that the only reliable blessing in life is to place your undivided trust in the Lord. Blessed are they whose trust is in the invisible, silent, abiding Source of life *and love*.

So, there you have it. This morning we have discovered that the wisdom of the prophet, the Psalmist, the apostle Paul, and Jesus is not all that different from the wisdom of a crusty old farmer at Still & Williams Feed & Seed.

It is a wisdom that doesn't try to explain the mystery of how plants grow and bear fruit. Instead, it is a wisdom that has already learned to trust what is an invisible, silent, and abiding Mystery. It is a wisdom that hands each of us a fresh seedling of a tree and says, "Plant *this* in a *good place*, and see what happens!"

Amen.