

## **Wilderness Blessings**

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Luke 6:17-26

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### *Jeremiah 17:5-10*

Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

### *Luke 6: 17-26*

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. “Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

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If you have ever been to a youth group meeting, if you have ever sat in with the Scene, RBA, or InCasts, you have most likely had the chance to join them in a traditional opening, welcoming ritual of ‘highs’ and ‘lows.’ Each person has the opportunity to share their highs and lows, a positive and a negative, since they last met, and each also has the opportunity to pass if they would rather not say their answer aloud. This seemingly simple ritual is so much more. Seated around a circle, each person is present to all the others. Eye contact is made, facial expressions and body language show interest and attention. Listening is a gift offered to each other in this judgment free zone.

No matter how good or bad, no matter how small or incredible, no matter how repetitive or seemingly trivial to others, each high and low is welcomed, accepted and appreciated. It is a generous and genuine way of saying to one another, “we’re glad you are here.” These also give

hints of concerns that may need to be addressed one on one or provide some insight as to why that person seems tired, excited or distracted.

Sharing highs and lows has an inner effect as well as it makes you slow down and pay attention to what has been, what is, happening for you. Perhaps you relive a particular moment or experience or look at more closely now that you have given yourself a pause to do so.

What was a high for you this week?

What was a low for you this week?

I recently read of another term for highs and lows---roses and thorns. Presbyterian minister Elizabeth Lovell Milford said that “roses and thorns bring the reminder that even within the same flower of a day, there is beauty to behold as well as prickly things that might take you by surprise.” The image of roses and thorns is a reminder that our experiences are not always so cut and dry, so black and white, so this or that, but most often are so connected it is almost impossible to separate one part from another.

Our world functions so much in the binary of either/or that it can be hard to see beyond the distinctions. Good or bad. Male or female. Gay or straight. Rich or poor. Large or small. Right or wrong. Liberal or conservative. Yet real life is too messy and too complex to fit into neat little boxes. Real life happens on a spectrum, a very broad spectrum. Our highs and our lows are connected, they are the roses and thorns within the same flower of a day, a week, a month.

If we read Jeremiah’s prophetic words as binary there are clear lines for who is cursed and who is blessed. Those who trust in mere mortals and turn their hearts away from God will be cursed to live and suffer as a parched place in the wilderness, but those who trust in God shall be rewarded and blessed like a tree planted by the water, bearing fruit no matter the circumstances. Relying solely on other people will lead to sparse and hollow places, to relationships that are empty and lacking, to a life that is forlorn and barren. Trusting deeply in God will bring goodness and success as a never-ending stream of prosperity and happiness.

If we read Jesus’ words as binary there are clear lines of blessing and woe. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, those who are hated for their faith in Jesus. Woe and condemnation to those who are rich, those who have more than enough to eat, those who are enjoying a good laugh, and to those who are spoken of well. We instantly see that Jesus has radically flipped the understanding of blessings and woes as quickly and easily as he will one day overturn the moneychangers tables in the temple. Yet we still see the binary boxes of wilderness and of blessing.

We see highs or lows. We see roses or thorns.

Yet we know there is more, that the highs and the lows are connected, that they are the roses and thorns within the same flower. We know that we can look at either side of Jeremiah’s curses and blessings, at either side of Jesus’ blessings and woes, and find ourselves there. Each time we gather for worship we share in our prayers of confession that humbly acknowledge this truth as we ask for and receive God’s grace of forgiveness.

We also know that Jesus is all about inclusion, welcome and acceptance, not exclusion. The blessings, the highs, the roses, he offers, are the reversal of the woes, the lows, the thorns, that everyone experiences—the religious elite, the common people, as well as the vulnerable, overlooked, forgotten ones of society. Jesus’ message of God’s kingdom, God’s realm, is not just for the privileged and the powerful but for the oppressed and marginalized, and everyone in between. No one will be poor, no one will be hungry, no one will be without, while others have more than they need. No one will be in distress and left alone. Come follow Jesus into this upside-down world even though it is not easy as those who are cursed may revile, exclude and

defame you, yet we are blessed to live with such an awareness of the presence of God, and the world that God desires for all the beloved, for all to thrive.

Jesus' stark contrasts of blessings and woes bear witness to our complex reality and are meant to awaken us from complacency and procrastination and lead us into faithful action. We are meant to see one another, to hear one another, to show interest and attention, to welcome, accept, to appreciate others and to respond as needed.

David Ostendorf, UCC minister and Executive Director of the New Community, a national organization committed to building community, justice and equality, says it this way, "God does not take kindly to half-heartedness. God does not bless us as we maintain the status quo, reaping the accolades of those who hear us and follow us. God does not bless us as we bathe in respectability in the eyes of the world. God does not bless us as we quietly maintain tradition and gloss over or ignore prophetic voices calling us back to God – in the church and in the world. God does not bless us as we protect and build institutions and empires. God does not bless us, well off, full, comfortable, hearty, and well-spoken of.

This is what the Sermon on the Plain calls us to---to act in faith, in justice, and in hope, towards the world God sees for us as all are beloved and blessed, to be blessings in the wilderness, to fill in the gaps between the highs and lows of plenty and food insecurity, between those crying out for comfort and those who pass by, between those trust in God and those who reject God, and to see the roses and the thorns along the way. Amen.