

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
February 7, 2016
Rev. John F. Koerner

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV
Jeremiah 17:5-10

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, . . . They shall be like a tree planted by water, . . . it does not cease to bear fruit. (Jeremiah 17:7-8 N.R.S.V.)

Two Kinds of People

Some wag once said, “There are two kinds of people in the world. Those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who don’t.”

It turns out the prophet Jeremiah was one those who divide the world into two kinds of people. There are those who refuse to trust in God. These are the cursed. They are like a scrub dying in the desert.

Jeremiah goes on to say that there are also those who do place their trust in God. They are the blessed. They are like a tree planted by the river. The tree thrives and grows and continually bears fruit.

Now if you are want to be part of the cursed, you don’t have to do anything special. You don’t have to go on a diet. You don’t have to exercise. You don’t have to love God. You don’t have to read his word. You don’t have to love people. You don’t have to sacrifice for others. You don’t have to work to build relationships. You can just be part of what a pastor friend of mine calls, “The Larry Myers brand of religion.”

You remember the commercials that Larry Myers used to do about his car dealership. He would say come on and invite people to “Come on out to Larry Myers, where it’s all about you!”

There are any number of people who approach faith in the same way. They are looking for a religion that is all about them. Those are the people who are cursed, says Jeremiah. Why? Because, it is not about you, or me. It’s all about God.

A fellow pastor was telling me about a popular event they were holding in his church. So many people were trying to get into the church that it was causing a traffic jam in the street. A police officer came into the church and accosted the pastor. “What in God’s name is going on here?” He demanded.

The pastor smiled and said, “Everything. Everything we do here is in God’s name and for his

glory.”

Jeremiah says that those who refuse to trust God are cursed. They exist, but they don't really live. They hang on but they miss the abundant life, the joy of the Lord, and the blessing of being a blessing to others.

So if you want it to be all about you, you don't have to do anything at all. If you want to be blessed, then there are steps you need to take. The first step is trusting God. Now that is a pretty big deal.

You can praise God, worship God, and pray to God and still not trust God. Trusting is about giving God control in your life. The idea of giving up control scares the bejeepers out of most people. And no, I don't know what bejeepers are, so don't ask me. What I do know is that giving up control in my life is hard.

I read once about a barbaric tribe that had been converted to Christianity. They were all baptized in the river. Someone noticed that all of the men held their sword arms up out of the water when they were baptized. They wanted to be baptized, but they didn't want to give up their warlike ways.

If this story was about people today, it would be about us holding our checkbooks and wallets out of the water. On our money is printed the words, “In God we trust.” It is very ironic that most Americans trust the money far more than they trust God.

Many people refuse to tithe, that is give the first 10% of their money to God. They are afraid to tithe because, well, you know, we are in tough economic times. What I find really telling is that during the great depression, the average church member gave a higher percentage of income to God than now. I was not alive during the great depression, but I'm told that those times were far worse than now. We are better off financially now than we were then, but we still give less.

My point is that our lack of trust is less about our circumstances. It is always more about our fear and our doubt. It is less about what we think of ourselves, and more about how small we think our God is. God is always bigger, more powerful, and loving than anything we can imagine.

God wants all of us, because he loves us. He wants our sword arms, our wallets, our eyes, ears, and lips, our minds, our attitudes, and our hearts. God wants these things not so that we have to suffer, but so that he can give us the things that really matter.

Jeremiah says that the tree planted by the water flourishes. It grows tall and strong. It continuously bears fruit. As one of the great saints of the church has said, “With just one person totally given over to God, God can change the world.”

Each of us has the chance to be that person. That leads me to the next step. Trusting God does not mean that we stop working, worshipping, praying, and loving. It means that we keep our eyes,

hearts, and minds open for the opportunities God gives us to join him in his work. The opportunities are there, and the power is available if we will but trust God.

I love the image of the running water that Jeremiah uses. I love the image of the tree reaching out its roots to the water. The stream reminds me of the living water that Jesus mentioned when talking to the Samaritan woman by the well. He said, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." Jesus also told her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty." (John 4:7)

In the book of Revelation we also find the image of living water. In Rev. 22:1 John writes, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the lamb . . ."

For me this image of the water of life is the love and the power that flow from God's throne. When in prayer, in worship, in the reading and studying of scripture, we are stretching out our roots to be watered and sustained by the love and power of God's Spirit.

It is this living water that gives us the courage to place our trust in God and to join him in his work. We are not simply blessed for ourselves. We are blessed to be blessing to others.

Trusting and working with God means more than just praying to God about the things in our lives, which we cannot control. It means more than just crying out to God during times of crisis. Trusting and working with God is about each and every single day.

A friend of mine went into a business the other day, as a way of striking up conversation he said to the manager, "How often do you read scripture?"

The manager said, "Get out of here. Get out of here right now. I'm a businessman. I don't have time for that stuff."

Sounds like that manager was having a bad day. What bothers me about this is the implication that faith has no place in business decisions. If someone says in a business meaning, "I think this is a place that we need to trust God and do the right thing." Someone else is sure to say, "That faith stuff is nice, but we have to face reality."

The implication is that God has no real power in the world. That decisions in the everyday world have to be based on what we can see, and feel, and measure. Certainly we have to face reality, but the question is, "whose reality?"

Jesus promised in John 10:10 that he came that we might have life and have it abundantly. In this, Jesus was not promising riches or ease in life. What he was promising is the opportunity to know and experience the depth of his power and his love and his joy. He does not promise an easy journey, but rather a meaningful one.

You and I are blessed, because God can and does and will make a difference in the world through us.

Amen.