

Westminster Sermon – Arborvitae: The Tree of Life
Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 17:5-10, Luke 6:17-26
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Our first scripture reading is Jeremiah 17:5-10. In today's reading this ancient prophet concurs with the psalmist that a happy or blessed life is one that trusts in God. The metaphors of a tree planted by water and a shrub in the desert provide vivid imagery for those who trust in God and those who trust in themselves. Hear now, God's Holy Word.

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.⁶ 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. ⁷ Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. ⁸ 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. ⁹ The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it?¹⁰ 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. Amen.

Today's gospel reading is found in Luke 6:17-26. Just as Matthew has shaped the more familiar Sermon on the Mount, Luke's parallel Sermon on the Plain challenges the faith community to whom he writes. Jesus' teachings in Luke are for those who have committed themselves to follow Christ. The four beatitudes are contrasted with four woes and emphasize, as Jeremiah did, the importance of putting one's trust in God. Hear now, what the Spirit is saying

¹⁷ Jesus 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. ¹⁸ They had come to hear Jesus and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all in the crowd were trying to touch Jesus, for power came out from him and healed all of them.²⁰ Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹ "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.²² "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³ 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. ²⁴ "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.²⁵ "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.²⁶ "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. Amen.

The title of the mediation: Arborvitae: The Tree of Life

The text: 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. Jeremiah 17:7-8

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, may we live lives of faith that are able to stand tall and bend with grace when confronted with life's adversities. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The Arborvitae was the first North American tree to be brought back to Europe when French explorers returned to Paris. In 1558, the tree appropriately received the name "arborvitae," meaning "tree of life" in Latin. The tree became an asset on long sea voyages during the sixteenth century when explorers discovered that a tea made from the bark and leaves treated scurvy. Today, we know biochemicals from these trees stimulate the immune system and herbal remedies still contain its oil.

When Westminster completed the Steadfast Neighbor Site and Landscape Plan in 2020, we planted 10 of these tall slender trees to create a curtain of evergreen foliage between our parking lot and the neighbors to the north. The arborvitaes are among the numerous, varied, and native trees we selected to beautify our church grounds. Of course, in keeping with the wisdom of the ancient Hebrew prophets, the prior installation of a sprinkling system was necessary to provide water for the well-being and nourishment of the trees we planted.

A tree planted by water with strong roots, according to Jeremiah, is like those who trust in God. Because of the nourishment of water through the roots, the tree is resilient to heat, its leaves stay green, and it does not cease to bear fruit in the year of drought. The ancient Hebrews believed that those grounded in faith thrive and persevere. They have a flexibility, an inner joy, and a sense of well-being, even when things are difficult, even when inspiration is sparse, even when devastating news is received. This sense of well-being grows out of a trust and connectedness with God.

The Rev. Dr. Clint McCann (who was Westminster's 2019 Bay Weekend Speaker) reflects on the meaning of this metaphor in the [New Interpreter's Bible Commentary](#) and concludes that what the tree imagery highlights is not primarily the aspect of fruitfulness, of doing, but rather, the importance of a stable rootedness, of being. The roots are in precisely the proper place—beside water, which represents God's life-giving instruction. It is deep rootedness that allows the tree to withstand during times of drought and storm, something we have all experienced. People who trust in God find an inner strength to sustain their lives under the most challenging of circumstances because they are connected to the source of life.

This morning's bulletin includes a picture of the 2021 Wildlife Photographer People's Choice winning photograph which portrays willow trees and their reflection from the water's icy surface. The array and distribution of the reflected branches allude to the tree's symmetric root system which is as elaborate and extensive below the ground as its branches are above the ground. These roots are developed through years of prayer and faith formation, years of mission and community service, and years of worship and joyful praise.

On the other hand, according to Jeremiah, those who are like chaff or a shrub in the desert are those who live as if they are accountable to or responsible for no one. The irresponsible life is

the person with no depth, substance, or respect for other people and who moves with the wind in whatever direction it blows. The woes in Luke's beatitudes reflect Jeremiah's woe as Jesus challenges and calls out those who live as if they are accountable to no one: the rich who give nothing to the poor, the full who share no food with the hungry, those who laugh thoughtlessly in the presence of those who weep, and those for whom people speak well who risk nothing in advocating for those who are hated and persecuted. These spiritually parched and empty lives are like a shrub in the desert.

The tree metaphor continues in the New Testament. Jesus is crucified on a tree, in the shape of the cross, becoming the Arborvitae at the center of our faith. In Christ's willingness to climb the cross, the poor are rich, the hungry become full, those who weep rejoice, and the persecuted become those for whom people speak well.

As we prepare to gather at the communion table for spiritual nourishment, may the metaphor of the tree beckon us to grow deep roots in God's grace.

As the Pulitzer Prize poet, Mary Oliver summons us.

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

Inspired by the Arborvitae, "The Tree of Life," may we bow often, sustain our roots, reflect God's light, and stretch our limbs far and wide as we serve the poor, the hungry, the persecuted, and those who weep. As tall trees draw our gaze upward, may we rejoice in the highest Glory of our Creator, Gloria in Excelsis Deo. Amen.