

“Holy Hunger”
February 11, 2007

Jeremiah 17:5-8
Luke 6:17-26

To borrow a particular cadence of speech from the Wizard of Oz: curses and blessings and woes, oh my!!

I have struggled with the curses and blessings and woes in today’s readings; I have struggled with them all week long. For a brief, blissful moment or two, I thought that a Sunday off from preaching would make preparing a Sunday morning service miraculously easier than it was two weeks or two months ago. But then I ran into the wall of Jeremiah’s “Cursed are” and “Blessed are,” and I ran into the wall of Jesus’ “Blessed are you” and “Woe to you.” So despite my hopes of an easier sermon, all I could do for most of the last week was echo Dorothy, the Tinman, and the Scarecrow and say, “Curses and blessings and woes, oh my.”

So I muttered and I struggled, and, then, being a perfectly human human being, I started to struggle with the fact that I was struggling. I made several stabs at starting a sermon, and each time, I veered off in any number of directions. Friday afternoon rolled around, and I still seemed to be walking on the Yellow Brick Road, having no idea where it was taking me.

Frustrated and confused, I finally came in here, sat in a pew, and cried. The tears that came as I sat on that pew over there became a blessing, as tears almost always do, and they helped me see just what it was I’d been struggling with. What I saw was that I had been trying to figure out exactly where I fit in Jeremiah’s and Jesus’ curses and blessings and woes, and I’d been trying to figure out exactly where you fit, too. Am I – are you – are *we* among those who trust in mere mortals, those who trust in human strength? Or are you and I among those who trust in God, whose trust *is* God? Am I, are you, are *we* among the blessed ones who are poor, hungry, and weeping, or are we among the woeful ones who are rich, full, and laughing?

Sitting on that pew, I finally had the answers to my questions, and the answer to each and every one of them was, “Yes.” Yes, I and you and we are people who put our trust in human strength. Yes, I and you and we are people who put our trust in the sacred Spirit of all life. Yes, we are poor, hungry, and weeping. Yes, we are rich, full, and laughing. Over the course of our lives, over the course of a single year, and even over the course of a single hour, we can, each and every one of us, be all of these things, and we can know the curses, the blessings, and the woes that each of them brings.

Let’s start with Jeremiah’s blessed ones. I can stand here and honestly say that I do put my trust in God. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be here, in this pulpit. If I didn’t trust God, I don’t know *what* I’d be doing on a Sunday morning, instead, but I do know that it wouldn’t involve any pulpits! And I can stand here and confidently say that you put your trust in God, because, if you didn’t, you wouldn’t be here, either. I also know you put your trust in the Holy Spirit of life because you have shared so many of your stories with

me. And over and over again, I've heard stories in which you have chosen love over hate, you've chosen courageous giving over fearful hoarding, and you've chosen to live with hope instead of giving up. So we are indeed among those who put their trust in God, and we have received the blessings of that trust.

But, my beloved brothers and sisters, we are also among the ones who know the cursedness that comes from trusting in human strength, trusting in our own ability and energy, instead of trusting in the Holy One who is the *source* of our strength, ability, and energy. More times than I want to remember, I've fallen into the trap –and it's a trap that becomes its own curse – of believing that what I needed to do was to try harder, think harder, work harder, *push* harder, when what I and the situation needed most was for me to trust in God's work. What it needed most was for me to trust in God and not in the mere mortal that I am. And I can stand here and say in complete confidence that I am not the only one in this sanctuary who has ever done that. I am also not the only one here this morning who has held on so tightly to some achievement, some self-image, or some material possession that there was, in that moment, no room left in my hands or my heart for the gift of God's grace and guidance.

So I hear Jeremiah describing all of us as both blessed and cursed, and, through Jeremiah, I hear God calling all of us to help one another live more and more fully into the blessedness of entrusting our lives to the loving Spirit of God.

So far, so good, but dealing with Jeremiah was the *easier* part of my struggle with this morning's readings. Jesus, being Jesus, was far more challenging. Here he is, describing us – people who are rich, who have their fill, and who are laughing – and he is saying, "Woe to you," woe to *us*.

In case you want to argue with me that all of us are rich, I ask you to grapple with the fact that over 1 billion people, almost 20% of the world's population, live on less than the equivalent of one dollar a day, 365 dollars a year. One billion people try to survive on less than what Chey and I paid to the veterinarian a couple of months ago. Try to imagine living on 365 dollars a year. That's less than most car repair bills; it's less than half of what this relatively small church spends in a year on a single, weekly newspaper ad. And over a billion of our brothers and sisters have only \$365 a year for food, clothing, shelter, and medical care, if there's any available. In this world, you and I are all rich, and Jesus says to us, "Woe to you."

We are also all among those who are filled now, even though some of our budgets may be tight and we may have to forgo some of our favorite foods because they've gotten too expensive. We are not among the physically hungry, whom Jesus calls "blessed," because we are not even close to being among the 10 million people who die every year because of malnutrition. Think about that statistic for just a moment. Try to imagine enough people to make up 1000 Sonomas – all the people you know here, all the people you don't know but see in the stores and on the street, kids in the schools, people in their houses. Imagine, not 10 or 100 Sonomas, but a thousand Sonomas disappearing off the face of the earth each and every year ... sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, all dying because they don't have enough to eat. Ten million people, every year.

These are the hungry and the poor Jesus declares to be blessed, not blessed because poverty and hunger bring spiritual or moral superiority, but blessed in the sense of being beloved by God in a world that has forsaken them. And, Jesus declares, woe to us who are rich and full if we are not troubled by that world, *our* world, because if we're *not* troubled, we're not listening to the God who *is* troubled

But if we are troubled, if we are grieved by the vast differences between the world as it is and the world of *Shalom* that God envisions, the commonwealth of justice and peace that God longs to bring into being ... if we are troubled and grieved, we can experience a holy hunger, a sacred longing for a better world that opens us to receive God's blessings and to *be* God's blessing.

I've encountered this holy hunger in and among you in so many different forms. It's at the heart of your longing for an end to war and violence. It's at the heart of your longing for economic justice and an end to the exploitation of God's people and God's creation. Holy hunger animates your longing for reconciliation among family members, among friends, and among the nations and peoples of this earth. Holy hunger is at the heart of our longing to give and receive love, our longing for meaning and a sense of purpose in our lives. Holy hunger is the source of our longing for hope, for joy, and for beauty. And Jesus says to you, and to me, when we embrace that hunger, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." He doesn't say how or when or where, but Jesus asks us to trust God's promises and to trust God's presence in our hunger.

But my beloved brothers and sisters, we live in a time and a place that have made an art of convincing us that the way to feed our hunger and meet our longing is either through our own achievements or, more often, by buying some thing (or hundreds of things) or buying an experience, an image, an illusion of safety, or an illusion of superiority. We are all vulnerable to the seduction of this lie. For the nerds among us, the lie comes in believing that our worth lies in our intellectual achievements on their own, divorced from a sense of calling or sense of God's grace as the source of our abilities. For so many of us, the lie comes in believing that contentment will come by finding the right house or the right car or the right vacation or the right meal with the right bottle of wine.

None of these things is bad or wrong or sinful on its own. Instead, we lose our way with these things when we believe that they mean more than they do, when we believe they can satisfy the holy hunger that only God can satisfy. We lose our way when our focus on the things and experiences we *think* we need prevents us from hearing and responding to the call from God that we *truly* need in our lives. The specifics of our callings are as diverse and varied as God's creation – and that means our callings are *unendingly* diverse – but through the prophet Micah we hear what's at the heart of God's call in every person's life: to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. At its heart, every holy hunger we experience calls us to do these three things – act justly, love mercy and kindness, and walk humbly and attentively with the God who creates, redeems, and sustains us.

So I ask you, this morning and always, to open yourselves to your deepest longings, your deepest hopes. In a world of great brokenness and great beauty, what holy hunger burns in your heart and in your soul?

You may discover that hunger easily, or it may take time and effort, prayer and seeking, to find it. Whether it's easy or hard to discover, trust that that hunger is there, within you. Trust that it is a gift of grace and blessing. Trust that hunger. Let it challenge you, let it guide you, and remember always the words of Jesus, "Blessed are you who are hungry." "*Blessed* are you."

Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
February 11, 2007