



The Good Place



A Sermon By
Ms. Jean Cotting

February 17, 2019
The Sixth after Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2019-02-17-JC.mp3>.*

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Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; Luke 6:17-26

I very seldom to have an opportunity to watch television. However, when I do have those rare occasions when I am able. I REALLY watch television. I binge watch season after season of as much of show is available. This year over Christmas break, one such show I got into was “The Good Place.” It’s really clever and inventive show and I highly recommend it. I don’t want to give away any of the surprise twists to it, but the basic premise is about the afterlife. Four very different individuals find themselves dead and in heaven. And it’s wonderful – endless shrimp cocktail, endless frozen yogurt, this sort of robot/angel like being named Janet who shows up when summoned and will grant you your wishes, all sorts of other great things. Everyone is happy and cheerful and delighted to be there. The only problem is that the four main characters are imposters. They weren’t really supposed to be there. They don’t belong. They’re not necessarily evil but they are all very flawed in their own different ways: the main character is extremely selfish and narcissistic, another character has done many good works throughout her life but has done them for entirely selfish reasons, another is mindless, and my favorite – a philosophy professor is guilty of chronic moral indecisiveness. Through some sort of heavenly mix up, these four people who by virtue (or lack thereof) of how they lived their lives, have accidentally ended up in the Good Place, but they really should have been sent elsewhere. Much of the first season of the show is devoted to the fear that these main character have around their real identities being found out and being sent to The Bad Place.

When I hear the reading from this morning’s gospel, I feel very much like one of the four main characters in “The Good Place.” I listen to what Christ has to say about who is blessed and who is cursed, and I’ll be honest with you, I get REALLY worried. I have had an extremely good life. I am certainly not “rich” but I’ve always gotten by and been able to support myself and my son, not sumptuously but we’ve had the basics. I have no idea what it is like to really be hungry and I have laughed a lot more than I’ve wept. Unlike many of our Christian sisters and brothers in other parts of the world, I certainly have never suffered because of my religious beliefs or been hated or reviled because of my faith in Christ. On the contrary, my life in the church has opened amazing doors to me such as getting to know all of you good people. So again, when I reflect on this reading, it makes me very, very nervous.

Now, I could stand up here and speak about the gratuitous nature of salvation and that being saved is never a matter of “earning” ones way into heaven. And I would be right because all that is true. But while it might alleviate whatever fears I have about the afterlife, it does not quite get me there in terms of my feelings of inadequacy as Christian. For me, all this is about far more than just where I go after I die. It’s about discipleship. It’s about whether or not having heard the living and incarnate Word, the Good News of Jesus Christ proclaimed to me, have I responded and am I responding appropriately in how I live my life?

So in this morning’s gospel reading, Jesus is out with his disciples amongst the people. Now, this is not Jesus’ first rodeo. At this point he is a known quantity. The people from all around have heard of him and heard of the amazing things that he has done and said. And it’s not the just local yokels who are impressed by him. He is attracting people from Jerusalem, Tyre, and Sidon. Jerusalem, of course, is the epicenter of Jewish life. It’s where the Temple is, so it is a location of extreme religious importance in addition to being a major metropolitan center. Tyre and Sidon are very important coastal Phoenecian cities. They are relatively close to each other and both were known for their extreme wealth and importance. So it would sort of be like saying today that some local religious leader was attracting people from New York and DC. Here’s an interesting historical footnote about Tyre: one of the main sources of their wealth was that the water off Tyre is where murex mollusk were harvested from. These creatures were extremely important in the ancient world because murex were used in the production of the very rare and valuable purple dyes. Purple dye was a scarce commodity which is how purple came to be an indicator of royalty. A lot of people in Tyre and Sidon got

very, very rich off these mollusks. But, because the mollusk harvesting involves diving and this was long before the development of scuba technology, it was also very dangerous, and as is often the case the people who doing the actual diving and putting their lives at risk were not the ones getting rich. Of course, we cannot tell explicitly from the text whether these people are rich or poor but I suspect based on what Jesus goes on to say, the crowd was probably a mixed bag. It probably consisted of a few folks who were very wealthy and probably a lot of the people that the wealthy made their fortunes off of.

The other thing that caught my attention is this: he's not actually preaching when he says all this. He's surrounded by all these people who are trying to get close to him to be healed and the reading tells us that he looked at his disciples and then launched into what he had to say. So this is not like the Sermon on the Mount where he's standing up and preaching and saying, "Now hear this!" No, he's talking to his closest followers about the relative states of the people surrounding them. And what he distinguishes between are which people are blessed and which people are not. So this leads us to ask ourselves what exactly is Jesus saying and why is he saying it? What does it mean to be poor, hungry, weeping, and reviled vs. what it means to be rich, well fed, laughing, and well thought of. Why would one group be blessed and the other group not? Why does Jesus have it out for people who are well off? Does he want everyone to be unhappy?

One of the things that I have found over the years is that one of the best ways to puzzle out what a reading is trying to say to us is to look at the rest of the day's liturgy and readings. This morning collect, the prayer that gathers us in today says: "O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace." So I think that is our first clue to what Jesus is talking about when he speaks of blessedness. You see when we are poor, hungry, weeping, and/or reviled, those are times when we are the most reliant on the Lord, and the ability to rely on the Lord is an opportunity of great blessedness. When we are reliant on the Lord, that is where we are reminded of just how much we are in need of Jesus and his healing and sustaining presence. Now, I am not advising anyone to ignore or write off the needs of the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the reviled by saying, "Oh, the poor are blessed so I'm not going to do anything. I don't want to mess up their blessed status." By all means, let us do all that is in our power to help the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the reviled. But I also think that Jesus was trying to tell his disciples and us as well that we need to reach out to the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and reviled because it through knowing them that we come to understand what blessedness is really all about.

Prior to coming to seminary I had the opportunity to serve for a number of years in a street ministry congregation, and believe me it was every bit as much a congregation as anything else we find in the church. I started out the experience thinking, "Oh, this is a good thing. I can go serve people in need. I can help them." But I what I learned very early on is that I was far greater enriched by the experience of knowing them than whatever they got out of knowing me. When I would spend time praying with them I was the one who was moved by the incredibly deep faith that they had in God. Their faith and the depth of their relationship with God was often far stronger than what I possessed. I was amazed by the care that they took of one another, their incredible kindness generosity that showed to each other, even though they had so little. Their goodness and concern was often far in excess than what I was used to seeing in the world I normally inhabited, and time and time again I was humbled by the experience. They were, in spite of their circumstances or rather because of them, far more blessed than myself or the people I was accustomed to being around. I think this is what Jesus means when he talks about those who are blessed.

On the other hand, when we look at this morning's reading from the prophet Jeremiah, we see the other side of the equation. Speaking on behalf of the Lord, the prophet says, "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord." And then he goes on to say later in the passage, "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it." I think what God is saying to his people and to us today, is that when we are seduced into believing in the illusion of our own self-sufficiency we put ourselves in grave danger. That is when we are risk for losing what matters and losing our very selves. Because the fact is that all of us, rich or poor, hungry or well fed, weeping or laughing, reviled or well esteemed, we are all very much dependent of the Lord. The perverse heart that the prophet

speaks of is the heart that believes that those of us who have are somehow better, smarter, or more industrious than the have-nots. The perverse heart is the one that forgets that those of who have good jobs, profitable livelihoods, and are surrounded by loved ones, have those things for any reason other than incredibly good fortune.

I can only speak for myself. I don't want to project my reality onto anyone else. But none of what I have is because of my own merit or deservedness. I was fortunate enough to be born into a family that loved and nurtured me – accident of birth. Growing up I had good healthcare and enough to eat – again, nothing I did – accident of birth. I was taught by parents and teachers who cared about my education, and made sure I was in school and church when I was supposed to be. I grew up in a safe community, free from persecution, violence, and hate – again all these things were just a matter of where and to whom I was born and have nothing to do with me. I had and continue to have incredible role models and mentors, and opportunities laid out before me – still not me, just the good luck to be in the right place at the right time and amidst the right people. Nothing, absolutely nothing that I can lay claim to in my life is there because of me. It was all gift. Every single last thing, including life itself, is a gift.

So where does that leave me, where does it leave a lot of us? Well, first of all, if we are fortunate enough to have been gifted with advantages in life we obviously need to be very grateful and not allow ourselves to be seduced into believing that the things we have in our life are anything other than gift. But I also think we need to do more than just being grateful. Because it is all gift, we need to hold onto our material things very loosely. We need to be sure that we do not allow money, status, or privilege to become false idols that we put before God. We also need to let that understanding of giftedness to translate into how we see and treat those who have not been beneficiaries of the accident of birth sweepstakes. We need to give freely, share what we have, and give of ourselves because we realize, just like my homeless friends back in Ohio, that we are all in this together and that this is something we owe to one another, because that is how we live into our faith and discipleship in Christ. The message of Jesus' words in this morning's gospel is that Jesus wants us. Jesus wants to draw us to him. He is there on the level place. He is here among us this morning at Grace Church, surrounded by all of us – rich, poor, young, old, miserable, joyous. He wants us to reach out to him and to know that he is the sustaining force in our lives. He wants us to put our trust and reliance on him to heal us, to provide for, to take care of us, and in turn he wants to likewise participate in caring for one another. That is where we find blessedness - in living out who Jesus is to us, with and through one another. Amen.