

Being Christ: The Everydayness of Seeing and Loving Ourselves in Others
Sermon for St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN
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Sunday, February 17, 2019 – The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

In the name of the Triune God, whose love is right here within each of us. Amen.

Living in Minnesota this last few weeks has been ghastly. In this month alone over 300 people were treated for broken bones or other ice-related injuries.¹ Countless sprained elbows, wrists, knees, ankles; and bruised hips, bottoms, and shoulders are the outward and visible signs of the inward and invisible disgrace of falling on ice. The horror of the polar vortex brought with it worn out boilers, frozen pipes, dead car batteries, road rage, traffic accidents, rude neighbors who refused to shovel sidewalks, absent snow plows, even more snow, endless rituals of digging out-brushing-scraping snow and ice off of cars if they haven't been towed, cursing illegally parked cars that had yet to be towed, school closures, best-laid plans thwarted; thoughtful, beautiful and lovingly curated programs poorly attended, postponed, or cancelled; colds, flu, published typos, running out of toilet paper, and stepping in cat vomit.

The ridiculousness of the polar vortex compromised my spiritual immunity to the pervasive plague of callousness and cruelty that has infected this land.

¹ <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2019/02/05/ice-injuries-hospitals-busy>

Noticing how desperate my sin-sick soul was for some Gilead Balm, I reached for *The Book of Common Prayer* to remind myself of the promises I made when I was ordained as a Priest: to proclaim by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ; to love and to serve the people among whom I work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor; as a pastor, priest, and teacher, to nourish Christ's people from the riches of his grace; to strengthen them to glorify God in this life and the life to come.² I realized that in today's Gospel this is precisely what Jesus is calling each of us – you and me as the priesthood of all believers – to do together. So, with the help of a Jewish Philosopher, a Benedictine Monk, the Prophet Jeremiah, my favorite Womanist Theologian, and my Russian Religious Philosopher crush, this sermon will explore Jesus' call to each of us to do the Priestly work that God calls all of us to do.

Unlike Matthew's version, in which Jesus teaches on a Mountain, in Luke's account we read, **"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."**³ The Jesus of Luke's Gospel comes down to be with us. Jesus stands on our level, eye to eye, shoulder to shoulder, to

² *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 531.

³ Luke 6:17.

be with us. Jesus stands in solidarity with a vast array of people from every walk of life: the poor and the rich; the full and the hungry; those who laugh and those who weep; those who are spoken well of and those who are hated. Jesus loves and serves the people among whom he worked, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor.

Unlike the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew⁴ which address us in general (“Blessed are those...”), Jesus in Luke’s Gospel uses the word “you” – the form of direct address. Our encounter with this “you” of Jesus creates that divine meeting of the *I and Thou* that Jewish Philosopher Martin Buber laid bare when he wrote, **“I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting.”**⁵ Jesus meets each of us in the “you” of Luke’s Beatitudes. And unlike the nine blessings pronounced in Matthew’s Beatitudes, in Luke, Jesus pronounces four blessings and four woes directly to each of us: “Blessed are YOU” and “Woe to YOU.” It is all too easy, for those of us who are poor to use Luke’s Beatitudes and Woes to bludgeon the rich; for those who experience hunger to bludgeon those who are full; for those who weep to

⁴ Matthew 5:1-12.

⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Second Edition, with a Postscript by the Author added, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 11.

bludgeon those who are laughing; for those who are hated to bludgeon those who are highly praised. Instead, Jesus is being a good Anglican! Jesus meets us exactly where we are. Jesus stands in and among the rich and the poor; the hungry and the satisfied; the sad and the happy; the hated and the loved. Jesus applies the Anglican “both-and” by rejecting the binaries with which we enslave ourselves, and instead Jesus reveals the leaping joy, the laughter, the fullness, and the abundance of the Kingdom of God for all people! You-me; black-white; rich-poor; male-female; citizen-immigrant; gay-straight; young-old; strong-weak; loved-hated: Jesus stands eye to eye, shoulder to shoulder, with you and me, and pronounces a Holy Word of Blessing and the Holy Word of Woe to each and every one of us. This is what the Shona people of my Zimbabwean heritage call “Hunhu” more popularly known by its Zulu equivalent “Unbuntu” which insists that “a person can only be a person through other persons.”⁶

When the *I* and the *Thou* recognize themselves in each other; when I see and love myself in you, and you see and love yourself in me; when the rich see and love themselves in the poor; when the well-fed see and love themselves in the hungry; when the joyful see and love themselves in the grieving; when the

⁶ Panashe Chigumadzi, *These Bones Will Rise Again* (London, U.K.: The Indigo Press, 2018), 70.

well-liked see and love themselves in the despised, that's when God's love is freely, beautifully, and extravagantly given to everyone without exception. That's when God's kingdom comes! My favorite Womanist Theologian Dr. Emilie Townes writes,

Unity is only vigorous in an atmosphere that is unafraid of difference and diversity. An atmosphere that does not view difference as a barrier but, like the proverbial stew, makes the aroma richer and provides greater sustenance for the work of justice and of forging communities of resistance and hope.⁷

Facing our fears of each other's differences and diversity by breaking down the barriers which enslave us in binaries, requires Trust. In his book *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer* Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast writes,

Faith is trust. It takes courage to trust. The opposite of faith is not disbelief, but distrust, fear... Faith is the courage to respond gratefully to every given situation, out of trust in the Giver.⁸

The Beatitude from the today's reading from the Prophet Jeremiah describes the abundant life that this courage to trust brings forth:

**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.**

⁷ Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 149.

⁸ David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 198.

**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**

How do we cultivate this trust in God? How do we become Jeremiah's Tree of Life, unafraid, non-anxious, thriving with deep roots, green leaves, and abundant fruit?

How do we trust and follow Jesus down into that level plain to be with and in and among all of the differences, diversity, and difficulties in that stew of our shared humanity? How do we trust in the God who calls us to love and to serve all people, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor? How do we cultivate the trust that nourishes an abundant life?

Last weekend I was restored to wholeness, trust, and well-being at the Men's Retreat at the Episcopal House of Prayer in Collegeville. Worn out, beaten down, and infected with the cruelty and ridiculousness of this Minnesota winter, I followed Christ's call to **"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."**¹⁰ Dr. Christine Luna Munger, the Director of the Episcopal House of Prayer, taught us Benedictine spiritual practices, one of which has stayed with me: the Contemplative Trinitarian Breath. I invite you into this portable spiritual

⁹ Jeremiah 17:7-8 (NRSV).

¹⁰ Mark 6:31.

practice right now. Sitting comfortably, feel free to close your eyes. Be aware of your feet on the ground and the seat supporting the weight of your body. Notice your breath. Remember that God desires our healing and wholeness. Now as you take your first deep breath be still and know that God desires you to be **“grounded in Self.”** With your second deep breath be still and know that God desires you to be **“open to Others.”** With your third deep breath, be still and know that God desires you to continue **“seeking God.”** My Russian Religious Philosopher crush, Nikolai Berdyaev observed that we are called to contemplation and we are called to creative action. He wrote that while creativeness is action,

it also includes moments of contemplation which may be called heavenly; moments of rest when difficulties and labour vanish and the self is in communion with the divine. Contemplation is the highest state, it is an end in itself and cannot be a means. But contemplation is also creativeness, spiritual activity which overcomes anxiety and difficulties.”¹¹

Berdyaev writes, **“when [we are] enjoying a creative act which reveals truth or creates beauty or radiates love upon a fellow creature [we] recall paradise.”**¹²

I close with a creative and contemplative act. Poetry by Dr. Emilie Townes, which expresses our shared priestly calling to trust in “the everydayness of moral acts.”

¹¹ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 296.

¹² Berdyaev, 140.

It is what we do every day that shapes us and says more about us than those grand moments of righteous indignation and action:

the everydayness of listening closely when folks talk or don't talk to hear what they are saying;

the everydayness of taking some time, however short or long, to refresh ourselves through prayer or meditation;

the everydayness of speaking to folks and actually meaning whatever it is that is coming out of our mouths;

the everydayness of being a presence in people's lives;

the everydayness of designing a class session or lecture or reading or writing or thinking;

the everydayness of sharing a meal;

the everydayness of facing heartache and disappointment;

the everydayness of joy and laughter;

the everydayness of facing people who expect us to lead them somewhere or at least point them in the right direction and walk with them;

the everydayness of blending head and heart;

the everydayness of getting up and trying one more time to get our living right.¹³

May we trust and love God in ourselves. May we trust and love God in others.

May we trust and love God and be One. Amen.

¹³ Townes, 164.