

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C
February 14, 2010

Readings: Jeremiah 17:5-8; 1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20; Luke 6:17, 20-26

Curses of Distracted Living

Two weeks ago I wasn't with you here on Sunday morning because Jenni and I were on a weekend retreat with other deacon couples. Our retreat leader was Fr. Jack Fabian. He is a priest from the Archdiocese of Detroit who answered a call to start a new community in the Upper Peninsula, The Companions of Christ the Lamb. They have a thousand acres of land with a chapel and a few other buildings on which they offer remote wilderness retreats. Some go into the woods by themselves for four days, some for ten days, and some for forty days. I've been on a couple of the four day retreats at their facility.

Fr. Jack's theme for our recent retreat was: "*How to be spiritually aware in the midst of practical and distracted living.*" We live in two worlds at the same time. We live our material lives, but get so distracted that we lose touch with our spiritual lives. For Fr. Jack and his community, one of the ways to get back in touch with the spirit world is through nature. We have to slow down and let the Spirit work in us.

I know this from my own experience on my four day retreats; it took me the first two days to get over the restlessness, the need to be walking or doing something. Then I could finally calm down, sit on a log leaning back against a tree and listen and pray in a much different way. I would like to work up to a forty day retreat; it would be a real test to walk away from all human contact, from the internet, and from the news of the world. But, even in retirement, just trying to find a 40-day block of time without commitments is in itself a difficult challenge.

We have examples in our readings this morning of this existence of two worlds; of the contrasts between the things of this world and the things of God. We are reminded once again that man's ways are not God's ways. We hear about curses and blessings.

In our reading from the prophet Jeremiah, we hear about a barren bush in the desert and about a green tree planted by the water. The barren bush represents "*the one who trusts in human beings, who seeks his strength in flesh, whose heart turns away from the LORD.*" He is cursed. The green tree "*is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose hope is the LORD.*" He is blessed.

This same theme carried over into our responsorial psalm. We sang: "*Blessed are they who hope in the Lord.*" And we listened to Psalm 1:

*"Blessed the man who follows not
the counsel of the wicked,
nor walks in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the company of the insolent,
but delights in the law of the LORD
and meditates on his law day and night.
He is like a tree
planted near running water,
that yields its fruit in due season,*

*and whose leaves never fade.
Whatever he does, prospers.
Not so the wicked, not so;
they are like chaff which the wind drives away.
For the LORD watches over the way of the just,
but the way of the wicked vanishes.”*

We are blessed when we draw our strength from God, from our spiritual life, and not when we are dependent on the things of this world. Sometimes being blessed seems like a contradiction when we use our material judgment scales and criteria. In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus says that the poor and the hungry and the weeping are blessed. But we don't usually think of those suffering in Haiti today as being blessed. Jesus says woe to those who are rich, who have enough to eat, and who laugh. When we have these things, however, we usually consider ourselves blessed.

We are not blessed or cursed by what we have or don't have. Our blessings and curses come from where our attachments lie. It is not necessarily what we have, but what is it important to us. It is not that we need to be poor, but that we have a spirit of poverty. What we have can get in the way and can end up being a curse. The rich man has a hard time focusing on his spiritual life because of the distractions of managing his possessions; he begins to forget that they are gifts from God. The poor man realizes his dependence on God for meeting the necessities of life. He can focus and hope on something much better after this earthly life.

We are blessed when we put God first in our lives, but that is more difficult if we have a lot of possessions and when we do not experience physical sufferings. We are cursed when we try to make our possessions and even ourselves like gods; when we try to impress others and receive the esteem of our fellow man.

We need to focus on being spiritually rich, not materially rich. We need to consider the things of Heaven as more important than the things of this world. That's why I think the theme of my recent retreat is so appropriate to our readings today, and as we prepare to enter into the season of Lent. ***“How to be spiritually aware in the midst of practical and distracted living.”***

Lent is a retreat; a retreat we go on together. It is a time when we try to become more spiritually aware, not by running away to the wilderness, but in the midst of our practical and distracted lives. We need to manage our distractions. We live in the world, but we are called to not be of the world. Look at your attachments and consider this Lent how you can set aside the things that tie you to the earth and pick up the things that will bind you to Heaven.

Maybe you are a news junkie and are addicted to watching the news every night for an hour or more. With cable you can watch news all day long. Can you walk away from the television, close the door to your room or drive to church, and spend an hour in prayer listening for the Good News that God wants you to hear? Maybe you are obsessed with following the stock market. Can you spend the entire season of Lent without checking your stock portfolio? What is the soap opera or television show that seems so important that you can't seem to live without? Maybe it's American Idol. Can you spend that time instead in prayer or doing some work of charity or kindness. What will bring you more blessings, knowing the latest Idol gossip, or loving God and your neighbor? What is that

food or beverage that you like and crave so much that you think you need and deserve it? Give it up for forty days and build up that spiritual strength of the will to deny the things of this world that distract us. Allow yourself to have a spirit of poverty.

God's ways are not man's ways. We become like green and fruitful trees not by eating and drinking of this world's delights, but by tapping into the food and drink provided by the Spirit. We have to live in a material world, but don't let that cause you to lose your awareness of the Spiritual world. It is real and it surrounds us, and it can penetrate you to your very core if you can tune it in.

Deacon Joe Hulway