

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan**  
**“The Blessings of Trust?”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, February 17, 2019**

**Luke 6:17-26**

*He 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. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.*

*Then he looked up at his disciples and said:*

*‘Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*‘Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.*

*‘Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.*

*‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.*

*‘But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.*

*‘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.*

*‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*

**Jeremiah 17:5-8**

*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.*

*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.*

*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.*

*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.*

*The heart is devious above all else;  
it is perverse —  
who can understand it?  
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.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, I pray that you would take the words and images, the worries and the joys that each of us carry within. I pray that you would take the words of our songs and our prayers, of the scripture readings that we have heard, and of the words that you've laid upon my heart this day. Take all of these words and touch and bless them by your Spirit. Let them be the word of Christ. Let them be whatever word we need them to be this day, a word of peace and grace, a word of mercy and forgiveness, a word of love and acceptance, or even a word of challenge or rebuke. Whatever our hearts, our minds, and our souls need. Let Christ speak to each of us. I ask this prayer in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The last two months, looking outside the window watching the snow and the cold and the drear just kind of pile on and on and on, has made me realize that it is a lot better to recover from surgery during the summer than it is during the winter. But it was what it was, and I am thankful to be back. The passages today, as well as the call to worship and the anthem that we heard, speak about trees and about blessing and curses. As I've sat with the passages and thought about what seems to be in scripture this almost absolute distinction between those that are blessed and those that are cursed, I know for myself and for you, I want us all to be blessed. I want us to live always in that camp where we know God's love. We are convinced of God's care, the care of the people of God. That whenever we're down, we're lifted up. Whenever we cry, the tear is wiped away. Whenever we are hungry, we are fed. That we are loved and cared for. And I don't want any of us to be cursed. But when I wasn't looking out the window, I happened to be watching the news. And I can tell you for sure that we live in a land that so easily wants to label people as cursed or as blessed. If you have the same political view as I do, God bless you. If you don't, God will curse you. Two camps, right or wrong, which one are we in? And I hate to say it, but scripture seems to so clearly support that understanding of two camps, right or wrong, blessed or cursed and I've been wondering about that. I started to wonder about it when I got permission from my surgeon to go sit in the hot tub that's out in our back yard. In the cold, I would carefully sneak out, open the lid, and slide down into 103-degree water with the jets turned on high. And I would feel the absolute blessing of that moment. And as I sat there, and I looked up into the sky, what dominated my view was a huge oak tree that we have in our front yard. The trunk is enormous, and the roots, I only imagine, are so massive you can't see them. The branches reach up way beyond the height of any other tree in our neighborhood. And I pray that that tree never moves because if it did it would wipe out either our house or the neighbor's. But I have this image in my head of a tree that is solid and unmovable. And as I sat there looking up over the roofline, I realized how much a solid tree moves. Without leaves, when the light would come up, the branches of this huge oak tree were moving back and forth, sometimes ten feet one way or the other. It was unbelievable how much that tree danced in the weather. And one day, I imagined myself stuck to the very end of that branch on that solid tree with those huge roots, swinging back and forth to the wind, like riding a roller coaster, up and down, and all around. And I realize that as much as I want to be blessed and hang on to that blessing, there are times when I feel cursed. And I begin to wonder if maybe we've been reading the scriptures wrong when it talks so clearly about one camp and another, blessing and curse. That these words from the psalmist and the prophet are encouragements for us to realize that, at the end of the day or at the beginning of the day, we have a chance to make a decision.

Are we blessed, or are we cursed? And back and forth we swing. The turbulence of life, you all know it. You've lost loved ones. You've buried children. You have health challenges or your loved one does or your parents or your grandparents or your children or your grandchildren or your great-grandchildren. This is life. It is not one thing. It swirls and moves back and forth. And thinking about this movement back and forth and thinking about the image of a tree, and thinking about how the scriptures so clearly say that the tree that is rich and full of life is near the water not out in the salt and uninhabited

land, I remembered the story of a tree that I saw two years ago when I went away for a retreat to Big Sur in California, right on the coast. On a Sunday, with a storm raging, I went outside to offer my prayers. I told myself I wanted to go to church. And so I went out and found a trail and walked around the corner of where I was staying and looked out over this huge ravine, and in the middle of the ravine there was a tree that had grown up for I don't know how long, but then had bent 90 degrees pointing back towards the mountains. The winds off the Pacific just kept pushing and pushing that tree where it finally just gave in and bent all the way over, almost so much that it was touching the ground on the other side. And that day standing there, seeing that tree alive and bent meant so much to me because in January of 2017 I thought I was done with back surgeries. In April, on the year before I had the big surgery with all the screws and the rods and the turtle shell for three months and the pain and the agony, and I was convinced that in January all of that was behind me. Later that day, I came back into the hermitage, changed my clothes, sat down and wrote my wife a letter. It reads, "Peace. It's the fourth day of stillness, tucked up on a cliff overlooking the ocean in my wee little hermitage. It has taken four days to get quiet, to have all the clutter stop. Two days of sun and glory and two days of wind and rain and living in the clouds, it's taken four days but I'm finally quiet. I went to church today outside in the wind and the rain, under a tree on a path carved into the side of a canyon just below my hermitage, amongst the many glories of attending church outside in a storm overlooking the Pacific, two stand out. The first is thank you for loving me or more precisely for getting me, which maybe is loving me but it feels like more. The second is a powerful given awareness. I did not break like the oak tree bent almost to the ground, I did not break. In the face of so much hurt and pain, I did not break. So now I know, as I look to our future, to my back, and to all that lies before us, I may be bent but I did not break. In January of 2017, I was convinced it was over and that everything would be better [laughter]. Life doesn't work that way, does it? And now I return for my first Sunday back after my fourth spinal surgery. After spending time swirling between terror at what may lie ahead and joy in feeling better, I realized that this camp of blessing and curse, the line between them is not hard and fast, it's permeable and that each of us move from one side to the other depending on what's happening to us that day and where our heart and minds and souls are.

But I want to offer to you sort of what came to me. It was the invitation to crawl out of the branches, to come back down the tree, to come and shimmy down the trunk of life, and to sit where the roots are deep and the water flows, and goodness is noticeable, a place of trust. A place of trusting in the blessings of God. And what I've come to know more than I even wished to know is that we all have a choice. We decide if we are blessed or we are cursed. And as I thought about the choice that I would make, I remember this passage from Deuteronomy, "I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the Commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God walking in God's ways, observing God's Commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other Gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish. You shall not have long life in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call Heaven and Earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live loving the Lord your God, obeying God, holding fast to God, for that means life to you in length of days so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

Brothers and sisters in the swirl of life, in the swirl between blessings and curses, in the storms that come, I want to invite you to come down out of the mess, to sit at the base of that tree, and to choose life. Amen.