

Sermon: Epiphany 6: 2022 Annual Meeting

You may be surprised at the question I'm about to ask you. Did you ever learn to stand on your head when you were younger? May be you still do it of course, but maybe not! I confess I was a heavy kid and doing that was never on my radar. Overweight kids did not shine in the gym; you might know that too or as a skinny person, you might have seen them trying. I certainly tried to keep up. It was a wonderful joy when I was a high school senior and had trimmed down quite a lot and I discovered I could climb a rope in the gym. Perched at the top I had a different perspective of the gym. But if you ever stood on your head, I am sure everything must have seemed completely different, an upside-down world. Does the world feel a lot like that for you today? The world does not seem to as God created. Remember the creation story of Genesis 1 when everything God created was good. Right now, it seems very broken, and not the way God had intended for it to be or God and all of us want it to be. I'm not suggesting we all try and stand on our heads but imagine a different world. I mean wouldn't it be wonderful if we could flip our world somehow and everything would be in good order, people would love each other, the climate would not be running out of control, nations would not be at war with each other, and civil wars would never happen.

Our readings today contrast one world, a challenged world, with a different world where God's rule is supreme, and people follow God and not run after all the lures of the world. Jeremiah declares that those who trust in mere mortals, humanity, are cursed. Ugh! He likens them to a dried-up shrub in contrast to a living tree near a water supply. Of course, we all want to be like the living trees, and not like the dying cattle in drought-stricken parts of East Africa, what a tragedy. Jeremiah said only those who trust in God are blessed. His message has a similar ring to the one of Jesus we heard today. Jesus preached to his listeners about blessedness. Scholars tell me that the concept of blessedness was familiar to the people of his time. They would expect to hear pronouncements such as "Blessed are the wise for they shall not be fooled, blessed are the strong for their enemies shall fear them, blessed are the wealthy for they shall never go hungry. These blessings sound acceptable and expected, do they not? But for us today we rarely hear people talking about being blessed other than when they sneeze - right? And the word often used to translate "blessed" in contemporary versions of the Bible is "happy." In French it would be "debonair." "Vous etes debonair si..." It sounds very nice to think you are debonair. So, a blessing for today could be "debonair are those who have invested well, their old age will be secure."

But for Jesus listeners and for us today his message is in stark contrast. He said "Blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are hungry now, blessed are you who weep now, blessed are you when people hate you on account of me." That does not sound very encouraging and not the message his listeners would have wanted to hear. What was happy about being poor and/or hungry and hated. Those people were the losers in society, not the ones known to be debonair, happy. However, Jesus identified these people as the ones who were in God's favor, and who would have a great reward in heaven. What a surprise it must have been, if they believed him, that they were the ones so blessed. If you have heard these Beatitudes many times before they may not come across as surprising. But think of the impact on his listeners on that first occasion. And think about his warnings to the rich, reminding them that their wealth is only for this life. That is no surprise as you know you can't "take it with you." He warned those full of good food that they would be hungry and those who were laughing that they would weep. He warned those who were aware people spoke well of them not to gloat because the

false prophets of the past had an adoring audience. But their messages of good news were all proved to be false. So, you are also being warned that to put all your trust in being comfortable now is misplaced.

Is the same message for everyone you might also ask? The same Gospel has been preached for 2000 years to people throughout the world. Yes there must have been many recipients who were and are poor and hungry, such as the people with Absalom Jones, the first African American ordained to the priesthood whose life we remember today. He was born into slavery and thus he knew about poverty hunger and weeping. No one other than his own people who knew him, spoke well of him. To them maybe it was a message of hope that God loved them deeply, loved them through their poverty. To you a person who is not hungry nor in poverty it is different. Then what do you do, you might be asking? Are you supposed to go hungry and cry all the time? Are you looking to be hated because you are a Christian and come to church, in person or remotely? I do not think so, but it is certainly a reminder to think about how you use what you have in an awareness that there are many without.

If you are wondering if all I have said so far has any connection with today being our annual meeting day, I am suggesting it does. I want you to think a little bit about ourselves, the Church of the Messiah, here in Chester right now. I think you are a wonderful congregation of people who truly love each other and wish to follow our Lord Jesus Christ. I am not just flattering you but offer tangible reasons for what I have said, and many are written as a part of my report that you will receive today. You can use it as a way of falling asleep tonight if you like! As a congregation you are sharing what you have with the needy, feeding the hungry and weeping with those who weep. However, I do know people speak well of you and you are not hated, but scoring 3 out of 4 - maybe is the best we can do – sorry Jesus!

As a congregation you do so much and as you have given me the opportunity to be a full-time rector here, I can serve in many ways with your blessings and in fact expectations. As a fulltime rector here I serve in the thrift shop when we have a shortage of volunteers (yesterday I was needed for the whole 4 hours.) I lead worship every week (apart from vacation Sundays) I visit you, call you when you are sick or your loved one is. As I am here, I can and do lead a lot of adult classes, for example: Bible studies, EFM, Inquirer's classes, mid-week lunch group, even Sunday forums may restart. I organize the annual Vacation Bible Camp and have led mission trips and other outreach opportunities. A really important ministry I lead is the Senior Resource Center as the Board President. You put it in my contract, and I honor that. As the President I speak with the program director several times a week and help with class location and scheduling. A large amount of time is needed for the Festival of Trees which brings in about 40% of the annual income for the SRC. I also choose to help with all the work needed to keep the grounds in good shape; we have a large property. Being a full-time rector means you have my time and full-time commitment to serve.

I say all this because you will need to decide how you will afford the next priest. On Thursday I sat with our amazing treasurer John, and we looked at the financial data and realized Messiah won't be able to offer a full-time position because it will be about \$20,000 short starting in 2023. You could hear that and feel depressed. However you could see this in a new way. You could turn that depressing thought on its head and turn it into one of hope and challenge. You can turn being defeated completely around and see it as a challenge you can overcome. I know I have never specifically spoken about finances in a sermon, but today I do want to share what I was sure the Holy Spirit told me to say when I prayed about my message for today

Just suppose say 50 of the 71 families in our directory, each agreed to give \$8 a week more – that's not even 2 cups of Starbucks a week – right? \$8 a week is \$400 a year. If each of the 50 families gave that it would match exactly the \$20,000 amount needed to allow you to call a full-time rector. A full-time rector will be here for you and not somewhere else a part of the week. This suggestion can work if you all decide to commit to it. You can do amazing things. This Messiah Miracle can be a reality. I invite you to pledge your willingness to each other and to your leaders. I assure you that you have wonderful leaders whom you can trust.

Today you heard Jesus speak in ways which surprised and baffled his listeners. You heard these words too, challenging no doubt. Jeremiah reminded you that those who trust in the Lord are blessed. You can feel the blessing of God when you commit to following Jesus and his Gospel of love. I invite you to say to each other today that you will trust in the Lord together. You trust that this amazing community of love that is the Church of the Messiah will continue to thrive and that you will continue to follow in faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, to serve him and together be a faithful community of faith hope and love for all who come here. Amen