

Shrubs and scrubs: Sunday, February 11

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

Sunday's Coming Premium
January 31, 2001

I do not have a green thumb. I don't speak to my plants. Instead I make them grab their throats, gasping for water, before I recognize their parched condition. Then I drench and almost drown them. This is no way to treat any living thing, plant or otherwise. Plants treated this unkindly are spindly and weak, anemic, with no strong root system. They hang on as long as they can, but they are not really living. They are a shadow of what they are meant to be.

Something similar happens to a child whose parents alternately meet his or her basic needs and then neglect them. Children in such a home are always walking on eggshells, antennae up in the air, trying to sniff out which parent will show up that evening—the caring one or the neglectful one, the one who disparages and demeans them or the one who overindulges them by drowning them in kindness as compensation for past abuse. Children in such families are often willing to take on any role—the perfectionist, the pleaser, the clown, the mascot, the scapegoat—to deflect the family tensions and keep the uneasy peace from shattering.

They know better than to break the family's rules—don't feel, don't trust, don't tell. Eventually, they become like those cursed people described by the prophet Jeremiah, people who can't even "see when relief comes." Disappointed, jacked around time after time when they dare to hope that things will actually change, they often react to relief or help or a new start in one of two ways: "I don't deserve it," or "It can't be real."

What a difference in plants and people when someone tends their needs! Their growth is not stunted. They not only survive but thrive, even in seasons of high heat and seasons of drought. Their leaves (or eyes) shine, and their skin is healthy looking. They are resilient, for they have been nourished and nurtured with a consistent love, and even in the dry season their roots sink deep and drink from the

underground spring that refreshes and renews them.

Jeremiah employs the metaphor of a withered shrub and a watered tree to talk about trust. The shrubs are those who trust in their own human strength and ingenuity or in other “mere mortals” to deliver them in adverse situations. The green trees are those who trust in God. Then Jeremiah makes one additional comment about hearts, one of his favorite topics. The heart, he says, “is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?” The heart, in other words, plays tricks. It is fickle, rationalizes, makes excuses, tells lies. It fools others and even itself.

Jesus saw that perverseness of the human heart. He saw that the hearts of some had played tricks. These people had become convinced that it was by their own reason and strength, by their own hard work in keeping the law that they were successful and powerful, healthy, wealthy and wise. And he saw that the poor, the sinners and tax collectors, the sick and outcast had been excluded by others and thus didn’t dare to expect any better reception from God.

Jesus revealed a different kind of heart, one whose mission was “to bring good news to the poor . . . release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind.” He was talking about recovery for “shrubs in the desert” who couldn’t see relief even when it stared them in the nose, who didn’t believe they deserved it, and thought that if it came their way, it must be a mistake.

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus comes down from the mountain where he has been praying and stands on a level place among his disciples and other listeners. These are not people who have come to see Jesus out of simple curiosity. They are “shrubs and scrubs” who have heard of his inaugural address and of his healing of lepers and paralytics and of his forgiving sins and calling sinners to follow him. They are beginning to believe that this Jesus might have good news for them.

And they are cured!

Jesus’s sermon on the plain is his enlistment speech for that great crowd of disciples who want to follow him. It is a wonderful combination of promise fulfilled and promise still to come, and of marching orders.

Jesus tells them: “Yours is the kingdom, the reign of God, that my mother Mary sang about in a lullaby before I was even born. Where the powerful and proud are brought down and scattered in the imagination of their hearts; where the poor and lowly are

gathered up in grace; and where the hungry are filled with good things, while the rich are sent away empty.”

Jesus speaks “on the level” to you and me too. He urges us to hear both the blessings and the woes in this text, the promises and the warnings. Our hearts sometimes trick us into believing that either we have earned everything we have by our own strength, or that God’s grace for us is too good to be true. But the reign of God in Christ Jesus is always about reclamation.

When reclaimed, we no longer have to be the perfectionist, the pleaser, the clown, the mascot, the scapegoat. We can feel again, we can trust again, we can speak again—of this one who loves us steadfastly, who has the power to turn deserts and wastelands into lush groves of fruitful trees.