

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

'And he came down with them and stood on a level place.'

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The whole world seems to flock to our Lord Jesus, seeking something simple: to be healed.

We, we common humans, and perhaps more so we Americans, who pride ourselves, sometimes to the point of arrogance, on our ability to achieve anything if we just try hard enough, if we just put our mind to it, if we just believe in ourselves; we may think we have very little in common with the peasant wanderers that we read about in the Gospel, for we are free, educated, strong, and bold. They are slaves to a foreign power, ignorant, weak, and scared.

But in this much we can empathize with them: we too are seeking to be healed.

Who looks at their life in the light of day, or in the near sleep of night, and thinks that they are truly well? We have everything, yet we still are overcome with meaningless desires. We think we are smart, but we liquefy our brains with computers and games and television. We love our family, but not enough. We love our relatives, but not too much. We enjoy our friends, but not so much as to not keep a storehouse of petty gripes about them. We love ourselves, but only enough to hate everything that we are, for to love what you are entails hating what you lack. This seems contradictory, but who is there here who is happy with themselves who does not daydream of being someone else, even if that someone else is just you, with improvements.

This is why the Fathers taught that the human heart, in its natural, sinful state, only finds two places of rest: arrogance or despair. For we either ignore our hatred of ourselves and live blind lives focused on our own invented virtue, even as the Pharisees did; or we ignore our love of ourselves and focus on the abyss of

our sin, even as every suicide does, and in focusing on this abyss, we fall into it.

We, even as those who crawl toward the Lord from Tyre and Sidon, long to be healed, and in this our only hope is found, for this longing to be healed is nothing but Faith, which alone saves.

Yet faith can be misplaced, and so often is. The prideful by nature put their faith in themselves, that they might be saved by their own competence and skill, by their own power and vision and wealth and cunning. [These are those who *dress in fine raiment* who not long ago we would imagine wearing three piece suits in the marble buildings of Washington DC or Wall Street, or who now, more likely, dress ironically in walled palaces in some Valley they say is made of Silicon.]

The despairing also misplace their faith by nature. They put their faith in big men, who hold big ideas, and promise big change. They trust in the peddlers of '-isms,' and spend their days angry with the '-isms' of today since they are so inferior to the imagined '-isms' of tomorrow.

Both the despairing and the prideful are idolators; for they *worship the created rather than the creator*. And most people are not only one of these or the other. We are all both; both self-hating and prideful; despairing and self-righteous. Of these, the prophet Jeremiah speaks plainly: '*Cursed is the man who trusts in man.*'

For whether the man is someone else or one's self, both vainly worship corrupt human beings. This we all do, and for this reason the Lord tells us '*put ye not your trust in princes*' lest we ' *dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, 'in an uninhabited salt land.*'

Therefore, *blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord*, who alone, uncreated, is worthy of faith; who lays waste to nations and kings and men and all their pride, and *melts the land with the word of his mouth*, but makes the man who trusts in this word *as a tree planted by still waters*.

Our Lord preaches His word today, even as He heals.

'Blessed are the poor.' *'Blessed are the hungry.'* *'Blessed are those who weep.'* *'Blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you and revile you.'*
For

the poor will receive the kingdom. To the hungry, they shall have plenty, and be satisfied. To the mourning, they shall laugh.

Words of comfort, consolation, and hope. These are indeed beautiful promises.

But what follows?

'Woe to you who are rich.' *'Woe to you who are full.'* *'Woe to you that laugh.'*

Words of curse and anathema and condemnation. Promises to be feared.

We tend to read this passage and think that the Lord speaks of two groups of people, something like the *sheep and the goats*. There is the forgotten everyman, John Doe, the deserving poor, and to these, our Lord shows mercy. Then there is the man of means, the powerful, those who live in indulgence and can buy themselves out of any consequence. And to these, God shows unrelenting wrath.

'But God desires the death of no man.'

Miserable wrecks that we are, did we not just say that we are all both? The broken and the breaker? The hateful and the hated? The hungry and the greedy? This is all to say, did we not just say that we are all sinners? For when the poor are given the kingdom, shall they not be rich? When the hungry are given food, shall they not be full? When the those who mourn are comforted, shall they not laugh? Yet then these same shall be given woe. They shall be humiliated and brought low. They shall be *scattered in the imagination of their hearts*. All this shall befall them, *that they may not put their trust in princes.* *'In man, or the child of man.'* For *'cursed is every man that trusts in man.'*

Put your faith in no idol, no idea, no machination, no man, save the one Man; the Son of Man, the Man spoken of in our Psalm, *who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but delights in the law of the Lord*. In Him alone shall you have faith, for behold He alone is your God. He comes before us, that the

hem of His garment may be touched, that power might flow from His flesh, that many may be healed.

Why have you come to church this day, if not to touch the flesh of the Son, that all that is sick in you may be made whole? Why have you come?

'And crowd came to touch him. And they were all healed.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Jeremiah 17:5-8; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26.