



# ***The Westminster Pulpit***

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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## ***“When I am among the trees ...”*** **Sermon on Luke 6:17-26**

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There's division in our scripture this morning between the cursed and the righteous. The “woe to you” crowd and the “blessed are you” crowd.

Margie read from the prophet Jeremiah of those “shrubs in the desert.” Those cursed, cursed mortals who make flesh their strength. But those who those who trust in the Lord? “They are like trees planted by streams of water.

It sounds like Jeremiah was just singing the psalm we sung, Psalm One, “Happy are they who delight in the law of God. They are like trees planted by streams of water.” But there is division, “The wicked are not so, they are like chaff that the wind drives away.” With any division, one must choose a side, unless you're Presbyterian, then it's been chosen for you. But it seems even Presbyterians are exercising free will and personal liberties, and we choose sides by checking in with our favorite 24-hour news network.

But another way would be to listen to Jesus.

*Luke 6:17-26.*

<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. <sup>19</sup> And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

<sup>20</sup> Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

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

<sup>21</sup> “Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

<sup>22</sup> “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you,  
revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup> Rejoice in  
that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that  
is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

<sup>24</sup> “But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

<sup>25</sup> “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.

<sup>26</sup> “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors  
did to the false prophets.

Those who are blessed and those in the “woe.” What side do you choose? Or did Jesus make the choice for us? Woe to the rich, woe to the full. Woe to the laughing. Woe to those who look for the approval of others. Your task is to be true and not popular.

I don’t know which side you find yourself on. But can I say that I’m on the side that is tired of all the division. I don’t think Jeremiah, and the psalmist and Jesus, desire the message to be about the line divides. After all, we were the ones who drew the lines in the first place...gerrymandering the way we live and move and have our being to be with people who look and sound and act like we do.

I believe Jeremiah, the psalmist, and Jesus are calling us to erase the line through wandering and wondering about the Word of God. Meditating on the Word of God both and day night. It’s full time. Full time!

The image that is used is that of a tree planted near streams of water. When was the last time you traveled into that metaphor? When was the last time you stepped on the brakes and took the exit, slowed down to make the turn onto gravel, slowed down as the tree canopy hides the sky? Then it all narrows up and you come to a stop, and open the door. And it smells like Genesis One, everything fresh and new.

When was the last time you came to a favorite place where the water and rock collide, and the coolness of the air makes you catch your breath? It's a holy place. I'm hoping to be there this time tomorrow. My hope is to be in mountains of Colorado. I'm less of skier and more of a "bump on a log" kind of guy, where the snowflakes fall. I like to just sit under the evergreen, the snow caught in the branches...to be among the trees.

For the Word of God comes to me there in the sound of still, small voice, that is, the sound that snow makes when it falls. And there, the Word of God for me is always the same. "Be still and know that I am God."

"When I am among the trees, especially the willows and the honey locust, equally the beech, the oaks, and the pines, they give off such hints of gladness. I would almost say that they save me, and daily." Part of what it means to meditate on the Word of God, both day and night, is to seek to understand the metaphor. Take time to be with the tree planted near streams of water. They speak of holy things. Eternal things.

Luke writes, "Everyone was trying to touch him." Everyone was trying to touch him. Meditate on that for a moment. Everyone was trying to touch him, as if everyone knows there's something in themselves that is broken.

As the poet writes, "I am so distant from the hope of myself." You see if everyone is broken, there's no division there. We're in need of salvation together. And our brokenness can draw us in.

Blessed are you who've lost it all.  
Blessed are you who are hungry.  
Blessed are you who mourn.

The light flows from their branches. And they call again, "It's simple," they say, "and you, too, have come into this world to do this, to go easy to be filled with light, and to shine."

We are thirsty, our roots stretch for water. He maketh me lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters. "You, too, have come into this world to do this, to go easy to be filled with light, and to shine." I have come to believe that the desire of God that we be about all that is eternal. To be light.

I have come to believe this through people like you. I have come to believe this oddly during times of brokenness and death. So many deaths in January; I have never witnessed anything like this. But what I come to believe is that my life is being lived among the trees, and they give off such hints of gladness. That is what I have learned.

This January, I found myself in the thoughts of Susan Baughman. She chaired the Search Committee that brought me to you. Susan was too modest to say that it was one of the greatest things she ever did. I don't know if you knew Susan. She would

have loved you. I loved what her daughter told me. "I was planning my wedding and didn't know where to seat a particular couple. Mom said, 'I love those two.'" "Mom, you've never met them." "Oh, right! But I will love them."

Susan moved from Nashville a few years back to be near family, for she was losing her memory. And while she was losing her memory, she kept a diary. Listen to what she wrote: "I'm constantly forgetting where things are, wasting so much time searching for things. Very frustrating. Emotionally, I'm becoming more vulnerable..." Broken. Searching for things...like a root in dry ground..." And then she finds it, and writes, "I'm more vulnerable...that's good! I feel more deeply about things, people, situations, I am just more aware of everyone and everything. While writing this, I suddenly realize that these are very things I've been praying for. To be more present and available to God." Meditating on God both and day and night.

On Thanksgiving last year, Susan learned that she had pancreatic cancer. On Thanksgiving, there she is in the hospital, and she's saying to the doctors, "Go home! It's Thanksgiving! Be with your families. You don't worry about me." Telling her son to go home. "Mom, I'm not leaving you in the hospital." She responded, "Well then, you sleep in the bed; I'll sleep in the chair." "Mom, that's just too hard to explain to the hospital staff." Eternal, you see. The one who meditates on the law – you shall love your God with all your heart, your mind, your strength. And you'll love your neighbor, there in the hospital, with hardly a memory. But you hold the memory of love.

I find myself among the trees. I would almost say, they save me and daily. You show me a life, and I'll show you something eternal. You show me a life, and I'll show you God. Elizabeth Farmer who was just as optimistic and loved flowers. Full of life and love. I live among the trees.... Judge Barbara Haynes, who had an eye for the least of these and whose justice rolled down like waters for those who were thirsty. Cynthia Hill, who heard a sermon by KC Ptomey, my predecessor, about Jesus taking a basin of water and a cloth and washing his disciples' feet. It resonated so much with Cynthia that after worship, she went to K.C.'s home with a towel and a basin of water, and said, "I'm here to wash your feet." Out on the porch in front of God and everyone, she washed his feet. She knew the language of love, and she lived that language of love. For 15 years, she volunteered at hospice, 15 years of getting some water, and touching people. I live among the trees...

James Kaminski, he was some sturdy oak. His roommate in college wrote, "Living with James and having his support my senior year, I believe saved me from spiraling into depression." Saved me.

When I am among the trees, they give of such hints of gladness. I would almost say they save me daily. I could go on and on about you, about this world, how we're so hungry together, thirsty for the water. How we're planted by streams of water, the waters of our baptism, how we grow, how we shine.