

EPIPHANY VI – 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.
Amen.

I learned something new this week. I had heard the gist of it before, but in a recent conversation, someone began describing how trees communicate with other trees. And it's not just simple stuff. There are parent trees that can detect when one of their offspring in the forest is weak and in need of help. Some of this information is communicated with the aid of fungi which live embedded in the roots of the trees. The fungi get photosynthesis from the trees, which gives them life, and the trees get connected to one another, which helps them to live. If an adult tree detects that a seedling is not doing well, it can share sap with many nutrients that give more energy to the seedling and help it to heal and then to thrive. That happens through the roots, which are greatly interwoven under the forest floor. Trees also communicate through their leaves. When attacked by an insect predator, they send chemical signals through the air to the other trees of their same species, those who are equally vulnerable to that insect species, and then the trees change the chemical make-up of their leaves, so they do not taste as good, and the insects do not gain enough nourishment to reproduce. Fascinating!

I probably would never have mentioned this, except that both the lesson from Jeremiah and Psalm 1, which we heard a couple of minutes ago, talk about trees. They both describe trees planted by water, "sending out their roots by the stream." They describe the wonderful effects of that, rich harvests of fruits, leaves that stay green and do not wither. Jeremiah sounds like he is talking about people when he says, "in the year of the drought, the tree is not anxious, and it does not

cease to bear fruit." The psalmist goes on to add, "In all that they do, they prosper."

Most of us grew up with little or no awareness that trees are *sentient beings*, that is, able to have sensations, reactions to the world and to life as it goes on around them. Few of us ever imagined that they could communicate with each other and with the ecosphere in which they are planted. We have a wonderful collect in MP, in which we address God, saying, "In you we live and move and have our being." It is as if trees are saying that as well. This is about relationship, about survival, about thriving.

The gospel today includes the Lucan version of the Beatitudes, that list of blessings that God holds out for us. In each of them, there is a gift mentioned for something we lack or something which corresponds to what we suffer. Years ago, when reading these verses, I was very confused by the first one: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven." That sounds like a lot of pie in the sky to me, a very cerebral and ethereal way to respond to great need. As I pushed further, checking out the version in Matthew's gospel, I heard this: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That moves us along a little bit, yet it was when I read that same verse from Matthew in the New English Bible that it all became clear: "How blest are those who know their need of God; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs." That makes all the difference, for being poor in spirit means living without God, and the gift here is knowing our need. *Knowing our need.*

I go back to the trees: they know their need for water and put out their roots to travel to the stream. They know their need for community and the shade that the forest canopy provides to keep temperatures down, to keep things moist, so they nurture each other. It takes all of them to

do that together. The trees know their need to be protected from predators, and they have learned to work together as a community to provide that protection, that safety. There is safety in numbers!

In Luke's version of the Beatitudes, it seems that they are all about emptiness of one kind or another. "Poor in spirit" is the emptiness of life without God, without purpose, without meaning, and the gift is the kingdom. Again, I want to recall the definition as "knowing our need of God." If we do not know what is missing, we shall never recognize the gift when it comes.

So, too, with our hungers. What are we each hungry for? Are we praying for a sense of fullness, for the gift of knowing when we have enough? Or are we so vague that there can never be enough, because we don't know what may fill the gaping hole in our stomachs, our hearts, our lives.

What about our weeping? What or who are we missing? What have we lost? How have we failed? These seem to be the primary dimensions of life we weep over, the death of someone beloved; the loss of a job, a home, a place in life; or our failure in something that was so important to us. Again, we cannot get beyond our weeping unless we name and face our pain.

The last of these Beatitudes is of a different character. It is about our loss of love and respect in this world, from the people of this world. And this is not by some accident, nor even because of some heinous crime we have committed. People have come to hate and revile us because we have stood for something; we have witnessed to a truth that calls them to account, or in the face of which they feel ashamed. We may not even have intended judgment, particularly their judgment, but they have taken it that way, and they are no longer comfortable with us. The promise that Jesus gives is no "fix;" it does not change

things in the present moment: rather, he says, “your reward is great in heaven.”

All of this reminds us that life is a spiritual journey, full of experiences and reflection. The experiences trigger our emotions, and then we are called to look at them. And when life brings us a hard blow or a deep wound, our immediate reaction is usually to strike back in some way, to cause pain or wounds to the other. But that may, at best, provide us with satisfaction that the other had to suffer, too. It does not heal our souls, and it does not change our experience. That kind of change—from loneliness to companionship, from weakness to soundness, from anger to peace, from emptiness to fullness—takes a deep awareness of what we need and the humility to ask God for it. It is when we engage in this inner work that the Beatitudes come true. *Amen.*

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