Present. Accounted for?
First Reading - Jeremiah 17:5-10
Second Reading - Luke 6:17-26

I don't know how I would have survived without… Take a moment and ponder how you would complete that sentence. *I don't know how I would have survived without…*

One could quickly jump to some hack for one day's minor crisis — *I don't know how I would have survived without … my trusty Swiss pocketknife … my Venti Caramel Brûlée Latte … my L.L. Bean duck shoes … the delayed departure for my flight connection … my mint m&m's … the new traffic circle.*

However, when you consider the whole of your life, I would guess it is more likely that it isn't a ***what*** that you wouldn't have survived without, but a ***who*** that was integral to your survival. *I don't know how I would have survived without…* Is it a spouse, a friend, a partner, the caring doctor who nursed you through your cancer treatment, the stranger who did not hesitate to pull you from a burning car, the community of believers amongst whom you sit on Sunday mornings, the Lord who remains your strength and your refuge, your sustenance and your salvation? It is interesting that the larger the lens we throw on life, survival transitions from an inventory to a

population. The unmistakably wise voice of Fred Rogers once observed that "w*hat matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves. What really matters is helping others win too. Even if it means slowing down and changing our course now and then."*

A pocket knife or a traffic circle may get you out of a jam, but pocket knives rust and roads decay, so our survival relies more on people than product, even more than we are ever willing to confess, fearing our illusions of independence will be burst. Yes, people die, but when love is shared from generation to generation, the power is unbroken and the impact is incalculable. Like Paul said, *"Love never ends."*

Charles Foster Kane realized this too late in the film, *Citizen Kane*. His last word, *Rosebud,* may have nominally referred to a sled he possessed as a child, but the reference is actually towards something far greater. You see, he was sledding outside his parents' house when he was taken away to prepare for a life of power and possession. He wound up in a legendary but dreary castle … alone, and his dying desire was the life he lost that day in the snow when he was sledding beside his parent's house, a place and a time when he felt loved and at home. In the end, Kane lived out what Jesus

warned against — *“For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”*

As with the other Gospels, Luke looks forward to the Kingdom of God, but perhaps more than the others, Luke is intentionally focused on how the Kingdom of God permeates the now. What, today, is out of sync with Kingdom dynamics? If, as illustrated in Revelation, the Kingdom of God holds a tree of life, *“with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations,”* as we look around today, is the fruit basket reaching everyone’s door? If, mourning, crying, and pain are known today, who is there to dry tears, provide support, be a healer? Luke is not satisfied with just the *sweet by and by*, and wants us to understand that our waiting for that blessed kingdom was never meant to be idle. Counterintuitively, for Luke, waiting for the Lord means getting busy.

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh … “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received

your consolation. 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."

Whoops! Says the preacher. There Jesus goes again, talking about the poor and the hungry and the disconsolate and the pitfalls of wealth. But folks don't like it when we talk about these things, viewing them as a political agenda, a heresy against the meritocracy, a conspiracy promoting dependency and laziness. *I came here to be comforted, not accosted.* Hey, I get it. These words are discomforting and guilt-inducing. How many days have I in some way been negligent and even indifferent to someone's poverty, depression, well-being? … All of them. Truth requires the confession that I dwell far more often in the second list than the first. Preachers' collars are stained with sweat and the finish on your church pew is worn thin, whenever these Bible readings show up in worship. Can't we just skip over them?

Perhaps you've heard the account of author Jim Wallis. When Wallis was in seminary, he and a classmate took a Bible and cut out every reference to the poor, and he says that when they finished, the Good Book was literally in shreds. He says, "It was falling apart in my hands. It was a Bible

full of holes. I would take it out to preach and say, 'Brothers and sisters, this is our American Bible.'"

If we're going to use the Bible in worship, we'd have to do some superhuman gymnastics to get around words like those in today's text of blessing and woe. Of course, there are plenty of folks who try maneuver around it, but I sure don't know how you do it. To the Israelites the Lord commanded — "*If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs."* Throughout the prophets, the message is reiterated — (Zech. 7:9-10) *"Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another."* Paul talked about it — *"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."* And a majority of Jesus public ministry was focused on it — *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor … to let the oppressed go free."*

I can't stand up here and you can't sit out there without wrestling with the reality that our peace, our wholeness will only be partial until there is peace and wholeness for all … can't do it … at least not if we're going to read the Bible.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh … "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 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."

Jesus, in Luke's version, is speaking these words on a plain, a level place. He is depicted at the center, surrounded by concentric circles of — the apostles; a larger number of his disciples/followers; and a multitude of others from cities and towns as far away as Sidon and Tyre, foreign lands on the Mediterranean coast. All are represented from the committed believer to the dubious skeptic, from Jew to Gentile to pagan, and it is no accident that Luke puts them all on a level field.

The blessings and woes here are not exhortations of possibility, but announcements of reality. To the poor, to the hungry, to those who grieve or

lament, Jesus says, “I am with you now. You see me at the door, on the sidewalk, at the shelter, in the hospital, after the funeral at home when everyone else has left to resume life, and even when you’re not fit or fun to be around. I’m here.”

Every Saturday, around dawn, Sylvia, a recently retired cancer surgeon, likes to take a walk, a really long walk *(like double digit miles)*, along the Bayshore in Tampa. She’s done it for years, and over these years a group of others have joined her for the jaunt, but they don’t walk empty handed, because Sylvia has a wagon. There are water bottles and a variety of other supplies that would be helpful to the unhoused she comes across who are temporarily or chronically without housing. To Sylvia, they are not “the poor,” they are people, and she understands that judgment is a pitiful partner for compassion.

Some she has come to know well. Others she is glad to meet. And if someone has a particular need — a coat (Even Floridians wear warm jackets in winter), or maybe a charger for a cell phone, or a bus token to go to a clinic — the following Saturday, if not before, she’ll be out there again with her wagon, having thrown in a coat, a phone charger, a bus token, prepared

to meet a real and present need because she's heard what Jesus said — *Blessed are you who are poor now…*

Through these blessings, Jesus says, "I am with you now. You see me at the door, on the sidewalk, at the shelter, in the hospital, after the funeral at home when everyone else has left to resume life, even when you're not fit or fun to be around. I'm here."

At the same time, there are always others who are having a bad day, not that the day before was any better. The brand new $10K paint job on the classic rebuilt supercar has been nicked by some spurious road gravel, and he is not satisfied with the auto shop's remedy, the phone shaking in his hand, a tell that his blood pressure is perilously close to heart attack range for the umpteenth time this week.

The spacious *Architectural Digest* house next door is silent (the kind of silence that is louder than a jet engine), but the night before the voices carried out to the sidewalk where late-night dog walkers slinked past, embarrassed by the broadcast of venomous words, fueled with alcohol and fired back and forth between spouses. Just another chapter in an ongoing play called rage. Three doors down, the teens laugh at the TikTok clip where

an influencer generates clicks by demeaning the perceived weaknesses in people he regards as different or less than. Of course, they're just aping the malignancy of public malevolence that the loudest and most influential voices have made commonplace. When the powerful make mockery of difference acceptable, even mainstream, where does it all lead?

Well over two millennia ago, Thucydides, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, observed what remains broken in humanity — "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must." Don't you hate it when you see people being cruel and insensitive for no other reason than that they can?

To the poor, to the hungry, to those who grieve or lament, Jesus says, "I am with you now … look for the helper. They're out there. I will go with you and help you find them."

To the proud, drunk with the notion of their supposed self-sufficiency, Jesus says, "I'm here, and yes, I've been watching and listening to … how easily you are enraged, how quick you are to judge and blame, how zealous you are to possess, what people actually say about you when you're not around, and yes, how even those close to you are slowly drifting away. This

is not going to end well for you. You too, may be whispering *Rosebud* to an empty cold room as your breathing faints."

The profound German writer Goethe said that you can easily judge the character of [people] by how [they] treat those who can do nothing for [them].

Christ is present. Does this reality bring us comfort or indigestion? Perhaps that is the question that calls for our attention. Amen.