



See with your Heart

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church, February 17, 2019
Luke 6:17-26

Last week I shared with all of you that a number of years ago, my husband Jeff and I had the amazing opportunity to attend two Lakota Sundances on Rosebud reservation. For those who weren't here last week, a Lakota Sundance is a traditional 8 day ceremony which includes 4 days of sunrise-to-sunset praying by a group of Lakota dancers. It is an extraordinary experience, and I was deeply moved to be able to witness it and to support my Sundancer friend Kevin.

The first four days of the ceremony is about preparation. You arrive in the camp and you pitch your tent. As others arrive you welcome them and help them get settled. You figure out how you are going to feed the people in your camp, miles away from running water or electricity or the nearest town or store or gas station. You assist the medicine man to find rocks and wood for the fire, and you make sure there is enough sage and cedar and tobacco for the various ceremonies associated with the event.

At the beginning of this time, when Jeff and I were two of the first who had arrived, Jeff was out with some others collecting wood, and I was alone in the camp setting up. A Lakota elder showed up at the camp and introduced himself to me, and welcomed me to the Sundance. I offered him some camp coffee, which was all I had at the time, and we talked for a while, and he said something to me I've never forgotten. He said, "See with the eye of your heart. Don't trust these eyes," he said, pointing to his physical eyes.

“They will deceive you.”

I’ve often wondered what exactly he might have been thinking of when he said this. Perhaps he reasonably imagined that this white woman, attending a Sundance for the first time, might not understand everything that was happening. Perhaps I might be tempted to make assumptions based on cultural misunderstandings or ignorance or even prejudice. Instead, he was telling me to dig deeper than what was on the surface, and to trust what my heart told me. He was inviting me to suspend my usual way of perceiving the world, to open myself to curiosity and wonder.

In a certain way, I wonder if we might understand today’s reading from Luke’s gospel along similar lines. He says, Blessed are the poor; woe to those who are rich. Don’t take things at face value. Don’t imagine that hunger and poverty and persecution have the last word, or that they define a person. Similarly, don’t assume that just because someone appears to be wealthy and at ease means that they have discovered the secrets of happiness and purpose in life. At first glance, looking at this passage with my usual perceptions in place, what I see is duality. I see the opposites of rich and poor, hungry and satisfied, grieving and laughing, popularity and persecution. I see Jesus turning the world upside down, telling us that whatever we think is true, assume the opposite and we’ll probably be closer to reality as it exists in the kingdom of God. And that’s all well and good. But when I look at this passage even more closely, with the eye of my heart, praying for the Spirit’s guidance, I see Jesus telling us that there is something deeper than pain and pleasure, abundance and scarcity, death and life. That something deeper is what the prophet is trying to describe in today’s reading from Jeremiah, when he talks about a tree planted beside water, one whose roots run deep, who can survive drought and heat, because they are sustained by God.

How many of you are familiar with the poet Rumi? Rumi was a Sufi mystic from the 13th century who wrote incredible poetry about his experience of the love of God, and about the union of all things in God. He wrote a poem called “The Great Wagon,” and in it he says this:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.¹

From the beginning of time, there have been people who have recognized that the apparent order of things in the world around us is just waves on an ocean. One minute you’re up; another you’re down. One day your life is wonderful; the next day, in the blink of an eye, it can come crashing down around you with no way to get back to where you were before. You fall in love; then your beloved is revealed as an ordinary person with morning breath and annoying habits. You make a fortune through hard work or winning the lottery; then the stock market fluctuates and you lose everything. What Jesus, and Rumi, and that Lakota elder on the prairie, and so many others are saying, is this. Whatever you are in right now, there is something deeper. There is something higher. There is something greater, and the thing that is greater is the kingdom of God. It is the ocean of the love of God in which we are swimming. In the love of God the past, the present, and the future blend together and are held in healing. In the love of God, we can dare great things, because we know that even terrible loss does not have the last word. In the love of God, we can know that our worst failures can be redeemed, and that resurrection comes out of death.

¹ Rumi, “The Great Wagon,” as quoted by *On Being*, December 6, 2016, accessed on February 17, 2019 at <https://onbeing.org/poetry/a-great-wagon/>.

The concrete thinkers in the room might be saying to yourselves, at this point, can you please say anything practical or helpful at all. And for you I want to say that you are right to ask for this – after all, in Luke’s gospel Jesus is teaching this “Sermon on the Plain” to multitudes of everyday people in ordinary life, unlike Matthew’s version of this same story where Jesus teaches his “Sermon on the Mount” to elite disciples up on the mountain where only prophets receive visions from God. But what I’ve been talking about is just the heart of what we call the Christian gospel, the paradox of death and resurrection. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus is going to model his teaching with his very life: he is heading to Jerusalem to show us that no circumstance of ordinary life, not even betrayal and abandonment and torture and death, is beyond the love and healing and life of God.

So for us in the 21st century, I’d like to invite you to think of some circumstance in your life that has some heat for you. It might be a personal situation that you are struggling with, or it might be a situation in the world you feel angst about. It might be something chronic that you’ve tried everything to change without success. Hear the words of Christ for you: *Yours is the kingdom of God. You will be filled. You will laugh. Blessed are you.*

God is in this with you, God is for you. God is beyond this situation, and God is also beside you, within your very breath. There is inhale, and there is exhale. There is life, and there is death. There is winter, and there is summer, and love of God remains. Amen.