

Jeremiah 17:5-10

5 Thus says the Lord:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals  
and make mere flesh their strength,  
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.

6 They shall be like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land.

7 Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,  
whose trust is the Lord.

8 They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

9 The heart is devious above all else;  
it is perverse—  
who can understand it?

10 I the Lord test the mind  
and search the heart,  
to give to all according to their ways,  
according to the fruit of their doings.

### **Planting Yourself by Living Water**

Well we've been talking an awful lot about Jesus lately, haven't we? We *are* a church, so that's kind of normal. But not everything in the church deals directly with Jesus; when you read Paul's letters you discover that he's dealing an awful lot with people's behavior, which isn't all about Jesus; the Old Testament doesn't even mention Jesus. But we've just been through the Advent season, and our focus was upon the prophecies of Jesus and about Jesus. Then came Christmas, which was all about Jesus. Then came the Epiphany, and again Jesus was the center of our attention, and last week was the Baptism of Our Lord, who happens to be Jesus. Yes, Jesus has been our focus now for nearly two months.

And you might think that as we start a worship series on *Intentional Discipleship* that we might keep our focus directly on Jesus, since we usually think of a disciple as a person who follows Jesus. But I believe that it's important as we start this series to take a good hard look at ourselves and ask ourselves if we are prepared to begin our journey as disciples...because that's where Jesus started his ministry; certainly he picked up disciples along the way, but the Bible is clear that the message that he first started preaching was **REPENT**, repent and believe the good news that God's kingdom has come. I think that repentance is a message that has really been neglected

by a lot of church people; when you ask someone why they belong to a church they usually talk about the people or the programs or the music or some aspect of worship. Even those who grow up in the church often see it as an educational institution. You go to Sunday school to learn about good behavior and the Bible and church traditions, you go to confirmation class and you learn about doctrine and church history, then you become confirmed and it's like a graduation ceremony. It's like there's no emphasis at all on the conversion of the soul. You know, Jesus took his message to Jews who grew up in the synagogue, who attended worship services regularly, who learned their traditions and history and customs, but his message was not to learn a lot of new stuff or unlearn the old stuff; it was to get your act together with God, and learning a religion doesn't do that. Jesus was telling folks that they need to re-connect with God, and to do that you need to humbly acknowledge that you've gone astray, that you haven't behaved the way God expects you to behave, and the reason people weren't doing a good job in following God was that they didn't trust God, and instead of placing their trust in God they were placing it in themselves.

So I thought I would tie in these wonderful altar decorations to this first and most important step in being a disciple, and that is to repent and put your trust in God. And to use the metaphor that Jeremiah uses in today's scripture passage, **you should plant yourself next to living water.** Think of this water as *spiritual* water, water that feeds the soul, and think of yourself as a plant, and I would ask you, "Are you planted by Living Water?"

We know that plants aren't the only things that thrive when planted near water; humans thrive as well. When you study the development of human civilization you discover that ALL great civilizations of the world developed along rivers. Why? Because rivers provided them with fresh water, and rivers fed trees and crops that grew near that water, and those trees crops provided a steady source of food to the people living by that fresh water. So just as *actual* water helps us to thrive physically, so too *spiritual* water helps us thrive spiritually.

And Jeremiah draws this distinction between those who place their trust in God and those who don't: "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord... They shall be like a tree planted by water," and **"Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals... whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert."** Jeremiah lived at a time when Judea was in a big mess. And Jeremiah writes that the whole nation, from the leadership on down, is corrupt and has lost its way. The common folk are worshiping idols, priests are stealing people's land, and the king is surrounding himself with yes-men who just tell him what he wants to hear. *No one is putting their trust in God.* And Jeremiah is trying to tell folks that bad things are in store for them if they continue to live their lives independent of God. Simply put, Jeremiah is calling on the people to repent, to change their ways, and come back to God. Not surprisingly, Jeremiah was not popular among the priests; they were out to kill him. He wasn't popular among the false prophets who were just telling the king what he wanted to hear and advising him to make alliances with Egypt and stop paying tribute to the Babylonians. And the king's decision to ignore Jeremiah would seal the fate of entire nation as Babylonian armies laid siege to Jerusalem, basically starving most of the people, then taking more of them as slaves and completely demolishing the city.

That is the background for today's scripture reading, and it serves us as a warning that we too must place our trust in the Lord *and* we must insist that our elected representatives *also* trust in the Lord - that doesn't mean that they all have to be Methodists, or Christians or even religious per se. It means that they need to be acting and legislating in ways that represent the will of the people who trust in God. Remember: they work for us. And Christians and other God-loving and God-fearing people must absolutely assert themselves – and maybe even get into politics – to ensure that this nation is trusting in God...like it says on our coins and bills. We place a lot of trust in our weaponry and our technology and our economy, but do we trust in the God of all people? We do a lot of things right in this nation, but I don't believe that all of our policies are pleasing to God or indicate a sense of trust in God, and Christians have too often remained inside their church buildings shaking their heads and talking about what terrible condition our society is in; we need to stop talking and start speaking with Jeremiah's prophetic voice, even if no one wants to hear it. We need to show that we place our trust in God, and we need to lead others to do the same.

Because trusting in God is the whole point of discipleship, and it is a point that a lot of people miss. A lot of folks think that discipleship is all about doing good deeds, but there's a problem with that. I can hardly think of anyone in the world who doesn't do good deeds for someone. Doing good deeds is fine, but our problem is that we feel content doing good deeds for some while we neglect or insult or hurt other. If you read the diaries of infamous Nazi leaders, they'll tell you what wonderful birthday presents they received from Adolph Hitler. He was a really nice guy...to *them*. He did good deeds...for some. And here's where that last part of today's scripture passage comes into play: **"The heart," says God, "is devious above all else."** The heart can make us believe whatever we want to believe about ourselves and about the world. And our clever little minds can explain away all of our behavior in positive terms, and we *do*. That's what happens when we don't put our trust in God. We feel that we are now at liberty to believe whatever we want to believe, and we do. And then we surround ourselves with people who believe the same things we do, and that helps us somehow feel more confident about our beliefs (at least we're not alone), and when we encounter those whose beliefs are different from our own we dismiss them or discredit them or mock them or worse. You can see the whole rotten process played out in Jesus' life as he is rejected by the powers that be, then falsely accused, then mocked, then tortured, then murdered. The heart is devious above all else...who can understand it? *We can't. And the world will continue to be marred by bigotry and injustice and violence and mayhem as long as we fail to trust in God and instead trust in ourselves.*

And when we stop trusting in God we don't just hurt one another; we hurt *ourselves*. People wonder why their lives are in such turmoil, why they never seem to feel peace or true joy, why they always seem to feel spiritually parched, why they live in fear and anxiety. They often blame others for their own unhappiness, and sadly some of them are stuck in their own misery *because they can't humble themselves enough to repent and place trust in God and start to serve God as Lord of their lives*. Instead they look to pastors or counselors or therapists to cure them of their illnesses. But sadly they can never be cured apart from God – that's what Jeremiah writes at the end of today's reading: **"I the Lord test the mind and search the heart."** The heart is so deceptive that *we* cannot understand our own behavior. We need to know God to know ourselves. Jeremiah is right; we can't understand our own hearts; and therefore we cannot heal ourselves, even with the help of the best trained and most experienced mental health professions

that exist. I read an account of one psychiatrist who has realized something about a lot of her patients who are simply stuck in their own illness. She writes:

**Listening to their stories, I wanted to offer advice. Why don't you escape from such a relationship? Leave your home, don't submit! Seek out others, expect more for yourself, I wanted to say. But I came to realize *that they could not really hear me*. They heard my words, perhaps even agreed with my recommendations. But habits, learned emotional responses, and remembered expectations...dictated the course of their lives. *These patients, like victims of encephalitis, could not be awakened.***

**The Bible has simple way of explaining this: It's called *hardness of heart*.** You get stuck in the mud of your own making because you will not reach out to God. You will not humble yourself before God. You will not trust in him. And so you are like a shrub in the desert, just struggling to survive and depending upon an occasional rainfall to stay alive. Why not plant yourself near the Living Water of God? Why not humble yourself completely and trust in God to put you on the road to health? God may employ the skills of a therapist or a pastor to help you along the way, but only God can make you spiritually healthy. Go plant yourself next to the water, the living water, the one who knows you better than you know yourself. That must be our first step on the road to discipleship.