

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Tempe, Arizona
The sixth Sunday after Epiphany
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Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft
Have a low anthropology and high theology

⁵This is what the Lord says. Cursed is anyone who trusts in mankind, who seeks his strength from human flesh, and who turns his heart away from the Lord. ⁶He will be like a juniper bush in the wasteland. He will not see good things when they come. He lives in a dry place in the wilderness, in a salty land where no one lives. ⁷But blessed is anyone who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. ⁸He will be like a tree planted by water. It sends out its roots to the stream. It does not fear the heat when it comes. Its leaves will remain green. It is not concerned about a time of drought. It does not stop producing fruit. – Jeremiah 17:5-8

What were your favorite classes in school? Perhaps you were a math whiz who loved to crunch the numbers. Perhaps you were a history buff and loved to learn about heroes and villains. Perhaps you were a phys. ed. athlete and loved to get your body moving. Personally, I always loved to learn about God and learn about people. Perhaps this is what led me to serve as a pastor. The ministry is where God and people come together in some wonderful ways. Two areas of study consider these thoughts. One is called anthropology. This is the scientific study of humanity with their behaviors, communities, and interactions. Another is called theology. This is the study of God.

Today, my sermon will be an intersection of these two fields of study. We will talk about anthropology and theology. We will talk about humanity and the LORD. Through this sermon, I will encourage you to decrease your view of human capability in our anthropology session. I will also encourage you to further look to God and rely on him through our theological discussion. Today, I encourage you to have a low anthropology and high theology. our theological discussion. Today, I encourage you to have a low anthropology and high theology.

God's Word for our consideration this morning comes from the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Perhaps you have heard it said before that Jeremiah was the wailing prophet. The book of Jeremiah is not structured in chronological order. Instead, it is full of prophecies of destruction from beginning to end. The middle of the book gives glimpses of gospel hope.

The section that we look at today is a section in which Jeremiah shares that there will be hope following destruction. Although the people of Judah would face God's wrath through invading nations, there was a glimmer of hope at the end of it all. Therefore, Jeremiah directs the people to repent and look to the LORD.

In this section of Jeremiah, the prophet shares curses and blessings. There are curses for those who look to the wrong place for strength. There are blessings for those who trust in the LORD. Jeremiah teaches us to have a low anthropology and high theology.

Regarding a low anthropology, the LORD says through Jeremiah, "Cursed is anyone who trusts in mankind, who seeks his strength from human flesh, and who turns his heart away from the Lord." This was certainly true in Jeremiah's day. With the dark warning about destruction and captivity that Jeremiah gives, trusting in humans to save a person would have been foolish. The King, Jehoiakim, could not save them. Mom could not save her baby. Dad couldn't save his family. The people of Judah were not to trust in humanity at this time. them. Mom could not save her baby. Dad couldn't save his family. The people of Judah were not to trust in humanity at this time.

The word of the LORD given through Jeremiah to the people of Judah is a message that ought to be heard by us today as well. We too must know that anyone who trusts in humanity and makes humans their strength is cursed as well. Humans cannot provide the salvation that you are looking for.

Today we find ourselves in the Sunday between two holidays that focus on relationships that can be turned into locations of undue trust in human flesh. These are Valentine's Day and President's Day. Let's consider first the holiday coming tomorrow, President's Day.

In the wake of big-time political actions, this is a message we need to hear. The newly inaugurated president will not provide the salvation that you feel you need. Neither will the next president nor the one after that. In the realm of politics, we often ascribe to human rulers an authority and power that is not their own.

This same sentiment as is shared in Jeremiah 17 is also shared in Psalm 146, where it is written, "Do not trust in human helpers, in a mortal man who cannot save you." (Psalm 146:3). The president of the United States, the other two governmental branches, and all governing authorities do not have the power that we often ascribe to them.

Many times in the realm of politics, people can fall into idolatry in how they treat human authorities. Martin Luther defined a god in the Large Catechism by writing, "A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress." When you put your trust in the president or any other politician in a way in which you expect all good from him or you take refuge from him in all distress, you have turned him into a god. This is idolatry.

You don't have to like the president or any other ruler however to be guilty of viewing them in idolatrous ways. Perhaps you could fall into believing they are capable of giving all good and providing refuge in all distress but believe them to be withholding such blessings. Your idol doesn't have to be a benevolent god.

We are not only guilty of giving undue trust to humans in the political realm, this can happen in any area of your life. Consider this concerning the holiday that happened on Friday, Valentine's Day.

It seems that Valentine's Day no longer simply considers romantic relationships, but all our relationships. In all of these, we can give undue trust to human strength. Perhaps you do this with your spouse. You look to your spouse as the person who should complete and fulfill you. Perhaps you do this with your friends. You look to your friends to be there for you when you need support at all times. Maybe you do this with a counselor or some paid help. You believe this person will solve all of your problems.

Dear humans, your anthropology is too high. Many people are great. You can be thankful for those God has put into your life. Yet you need to recognize that the country singer was wrong, most people are not good. They are actually sinful to the core. This is the teaching of original sin. As the psalmist expresses in Psalm 14, "All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Psalm 14:3). Your rulers, your parents, your spouse, your friends, they are all sinful broken people. You need to recognize this about them. If you elevate them to a status that they cannot reach, they will fail you every single time.

Those who trust in humanity rather than in God will face the consequences that the LORD describes through Jeremiah, "He will be like a juniper bush in the wasteland. He will not see good things when they come. He lives in a dry place in the wilderness, in a salty land where no one lives." Wives, your husband cannot save. Husbands, your wives cannot fulfill you. Children, your parents will let you down. Parents, your children won't live up to your expectations. Employers, your employees will not succeed.

Employees, your bosses will mess up. Everyone, sinful humans will not live up to your expectations. If you rely on them rather than the LORD, you will be like that juniper bush in the wasteland.

The first takeaway from the LORD's words through Jeremiah is to have a low anthropology. Those who trust in humanity and turn their hearts from the LORD are cursed.

Dear fellow humans, if your anthropology has been too high... if you have put your trust in human rulers and relationships, with a humble and contrite heart, confess these idolatrous relationships to the LORD.

As the LORD says through Jeremiah, those who trust in him are blessed. In our text, it is written, "But blessed is anyone who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him." The LORD moves us away from looking to human helpers, instead he empowers us to place our trust in him. Those who trust in the LORD and have their confidence in him are blessed. Have a high theology.

In Jeremiah's day, trusting in the LORD with the impending destruction and exile was the only answer. The LORD was in control of all things. The LORD was bringing about this discipline on his people. The LORD promised hope for those who looked to him. Their God would be with them in exile. Their God would still fulfill his promise of salvation, that is eternal salvation.

These words can also be heard by people of our day. Let us also have a high theology. Your president will not save. Your spouse will not fulfill. Your parents will mess up. Your children will not meet expectations. Your God however can do immeasurably more than you ask or imagine. (Ephesians 3:20)

Let us walk through all that your God has done. First, he did ultimately rescue Judah. He brought the time of exile to an end. He brought his people back to their land. He delivered them. He did this because of his promise. The LORD had promised that he would send the Savior of all to be born in that land. God delivered on that promise. In Bethlehem in Judea, the Savior of the world was born. Jesus Christ, who was true God and true man, was delivered to fulfill the promise. This was so that God would rescue not just the people of Judah from exile, but all people from the consequences and condemnation of sin. Jesus, who was the fulfillment of prophecy, lived a perfect life for you. He died on the cross to take the punishment of your sins. He rose from the grave showing his victory over all. A high theology finds its culmination in Jesus Christ. This is how great your God is.

Humans gathered here today, God encourages us to have a low anthropology and high theology. Let us put this into practice in our lives. Temper your expectations of your governing officials. They too are sinful human beings. They are not capable of giving you all good and protecting you from all bad. They will do things that are wrong. They will make mistakes. Submit your understanding of them to God's ultimate rule. Pray for your national leaders and local governing officials. Pray that God works through them and blesses them. A low anthropology will be a blessing in your vocation as a citizen.

Give your spouse a break. Your spouse is a sinful person. Husbands and wives sin against each other every single day. You need to understand that this will happen. Then, you need to submit to how God has ordered your relationship. God wills that the whole Christian life is one of repentance. Say sorry to your spouse. Forgive your spouse. A low anthropology will be a blessing in your vocation as a spouse.

Children, forgive your parents. Mom and dad are not perfect. They never will be. It strikes me that many growing adults hold on to much resentment of their parents. Having a low anthropology will be a blessing in your vocation as a child especially as you grow into an adult child.

Employees, give your bosses a break. They will mess up. They will upset you at times. They will even make decisions that seem self-centered and wrong. Your boss too is a sinful human being. Give him grace. Having a low anthropology will be a blessing in your vocation as an employee.

In all this, have a high theology. God is the one who brings true blessings. God is the one who gives you identity and hope. God is the one who saved you. As you serve all these people in your life, do it not just for the sake of others who may mess up. Instead, look at all your roles and relationships in life as opportunities to serve God by serving others. Let us approach serving in loving in this order as Jesus encouraged us to, "Jesus said to him, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-38).

As the LORD encourages us through Jeremiah, have a low anthropology and a high theology. Don't put your trust in humans. That will lead to destruction. Place your trust in the LORD. The LORD blesses you with eternal salvation and peace in Jesus. That is today's lesson. Amen.