

On the Level

Luke 6:17-26; Jeremiah 17:5-10

Slide: Blessed

I had just turned 20 years old when my Dad passed away from a yearlong battle of throat cancer. Many of you know that as I have shared it before. It was on May 7th and I was just beginning finals week at college. For many of you who have encountered significant loss at a young age, you understand what it's like. But, that day forced me for the first time to have to reconcile my faith and understanding of who God is with this new, extremely difficult thing that had occurred.

And, something else happened that day to me that I know is relatable for all people who encounter loss of this kind. The day before, my life was one way. The day after, it was completely altered and not by my choice. The only way I can explain it is that it felt like the world suddenly stopped.

Perhaps you know what I mean, and if you don't, you will. When an event happens

such as the death of a loved one, you walk through those first days as if life isn't life. Everyone else around you goes on planning, seeing friends at events, going to work and meetings, but it's rather strange to see it because you have somehow stopped in whatever reality it is you are living in while the world continues to turn.

And Jesus says you are blessed when this happens because he sees you grieve. He stops with you until you can laugh again.

Are we really blessed when we mourn? Is it a blessing to be poor or ostracized or hated for loving Jesus? Is there woe on us for having wealth or comfort or for people to think well of us? Why the extreme dualisms here, Jesus? Is the Kingdom of Heaven only for the poor and those with 401Ks need not apply to follow the way of Christ? Without dismissing that absolute need to raise up the poor and keep the rich accountable, there's more here than meets the eye, there has to be.

Slide: Blessed are the Poor

Now, this is the year that we read through quite a bit of Luke's Gospel. We began this year of Luke in Advent and will continue to hear Luke until next Advent when we move on to the Gospel of Matthew for a year. Unlike the other Gospels, the writer of Luke, who also wrote the book of Acts, lifts up the words and actions of Jesus that directly lift up those who are poor and oppressed while directly opposing those with power and wealth.

Certainly you see this in the other Gospels, too but definitely to a lesser degree. The only wealthy person who is shown to be a model of following Jesus in the Gospel of Luke is Zacchaeus, but even in that case, Zacchaeus gives away a great deal of his wealth at the end of that story.

Clearly, the writer of Luke wants to remind the community of the faithful the difficulties surrounding wealth and faithfulness to the God who has a particular care and love for those who are poor, oppressed and disenfranchised,

people and groups who are usually seen by the opposite as more problem than blessing.

So, that's a little background of Jesus' concerns seen through the eyes of Luke. The sayings of Jesus here from what is often called the "Sermon on the Plain", told here in Luke are also famously known as the Beatitudes. However, they are not the ones we tend to hear as much as we do from Matthew's Gospel. You might remember that when Jesus preaches this sermon in Matthew's Gospel, it's from a mount or hill, not a flat plain like in Luke's Gospel, as if Jesus is looking down at his disciples rather than on the level plain described here in today's reading.

Matthew also interprets the statements of Jesus as being more spiritualized instead of practical, succinct and worldly. In Matthew we hear "Blessed are the poor in spirit" instead of "Blessed are the poor." Matthew is almost hinting that if you were not poor, you likely were poor in spirit. And, just about anyone could certainly relate to being poor in spirit.

Slide: Woe to You

But, what Matthew also leaves out in his Gospel are woe statements – woe to you who are rich! This sermon indeed is quite different from Luke: “Blessed are the poor”, “Blessed are those who weep, “Woe to those who are rich,” “Woe to those who laugh.” These sayings are drawn from a very important sermon of Jesus, but Matthew has instead skipped that teaching.

Who would really want to hear these hard sayings of Jesus put so bluntly? Perhaps Matthew’s community would not have? Or, maybe it’s simpler than that. Maybe that audience was mostly the rich, the full, and those who have just about everything they need including those who speak well of them. And, put plainly, pretty much all Americans today need to hear these stark statements so that we can be held accountable in our tendency towards entitlements, power, wealth, and even our false sense of not having those things when we really do.

Slide: Rainbow on the Plain

But, there is more going on here. And, especially this week, when reading this “Sermon on the Plain”, certain things really popped out for me this time. For instance, notice that Jesus isn’t delivering his sermon on a mount or hill. He is on level ground with his disciples. In fact, it even says here that “Jesus looked up to his disciples”. Perhaps Jesus was even sitting a bit lower down than they were.

What that says to me is that he can see everyone at the same level. He can meet you eye to eye. He isn’t looking down on his disciples as if he is giving a TED talk or on a stage doling out the great speech. He’s with them on the same level space. And that alone gives us a clue as to why his statements are there.

Clearly, Jesus desires all his disciples to have a level playing field. But, to do that, they also need to see each other. They need to be on the level together. People who are on the level with one another are on equal footing. People who are attempting to show equality with one another also

see each other's concerns. To see someone as they are, to really see them, you have to be on the same level as they are.

And, Jesus sees them. He sees them poor, oppressed, wealthy and full of themselves. And, in that place, he makes them sit down together. He encourages a blessed community where those who are in need can be heard while those with wealth are reminded that with that comes not only responsibility, but danger.

On the level, we are the blessed community, a community that doesn't look down upon others or even up to them as if they are unattainable. Instead, this community is on the same level. Even just this little visual of Jesus delivering his sermon in this way says a lot about what he expects his followers to be and do.

But, let's not forget the first part of the reading for today. Remember it? Let me read it again:

"Jesus came down with the twelve and stood on a level

place, with a great crowd of disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them."

"And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them." What a powerful, visual, and awesome thought that as so many simply touched his cloak, they were healed. Jesus not only healed them, he allowed it. More importantly in my mind, he saw their need. He had compassion on them.

That is what on the level with someone means. When you truly see someone, you see them for the journey they are in. Without comparing that journey to yours; without one-upmanship to them; without having the same experience as them, you see them for what they may go through. That's called empathy. Empathy is

being able to wonder what it's like to walk in someone else's shoes without having walked it. It's wondering what that ache feels like even though you don't have it. It's walking with someone who lost someone without having done so. It's imagining what their poverty really means without first assuming it's their fault. Sure, we all have responsibilities to take for what we do and how we are within all of life's trials, but that doesn't mean we walk it alone. No one is an island. If Jesus sees you, than should you not see others he sees?

Slide: Heart Hands

This is what the Kingdom of God looks like to Jesus on the level plain. It's a place where we all find blessing because we, all of us, are both blessed and cursed with poverty, wealth, emptiness and fullness, oppression and acceptance. Jesus sees it. Our response is to see it, too. That is what following the way of the cross means.

Many of us would rather not sit on the level plain with Jesus. We may prefer the easier

path by asking, "can't we just believe in Jesus and call that enough"? Yet, the belief in Jesus also means being leveled out so that the whole Kingdom of God may thrive. This is both a comfort and a challenge. The comfort is that we are seen. The challenge is we must see others as the ones who also long to hold on to the hem of God. For Jesus didn't just heal a few. He healed them all.

Amen.