

<sup>17</sup>He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>18</sup>They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. <sup>19</sup>And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

<sup>20</sup>Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

<sup>21</sup>“Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

<sup>22</sup>“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you <sup>[a]</sup> on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup>Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

<sup>24</sup>“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

<sup>25</sup>“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.

<sup>26</sup>“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 17:7-10

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Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it? <sup>10</sup>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.

## ***“On Level Ground”***

In one of his many, many books, the wise theologian, and my dear friend, Walter Bruggemann, (haha...you all know that I once sat by him at in an airport lobby), said *that the sense of space is to be sharply distinguished from a sense of place. Space, he says, is an arena of freedom, without accountability, pressures and authority (as in “I need my space”), wherein place is space that has meaning, where memories have been made, where important words have been spoken, where vows have been exchanged, where promises have been uttered and demands have been issued.*<sup>1</sup> Today we study the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke, what is often called the Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, because it occurs in a PLACE which differs from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, described in the Gospel of Matthew. This sermon differs in other aspects as well from Matthew’s account...it has only 6 blessings whereas Matthew’s version has nine. It contains “woes” while Matthew’s does not. Its content is more direct and physical rather than spiritual (e.g. Luke says, the “Poor” rather than “the Poor in Spirit”). But what is so very different is as we’ve said, the location, the place... in Luke’s narrative, Jesus descended from the mountain and he was on level ground to give his sermon. Let’s consider the importance of place.

In Luke 6:13-16, Jesus had ascended a hill to pray. He then selected the 12 who would form his inner circle and came down to preach to a great throng who’d come from Jerusalem, other areas the Judea and the cities of Tyre, and Sidon. They’d come to hear him. As he spoke, those who were ill physically and those who were troubled spiritually, those from poor rural fishing communities and those from the prosperous port cities, were, none of them, geographically, higher or lower than one another. They were all, by virtue of being on level ground connected to each other. They were on equal footing when they heard from Jesus a radical message, an equalizing message.

Jesus preached, using the second person plural, (y’all). He delivered what’s been called the, “raw, unvarnished, faith-rattling declaration of the realm of God.”<sup>2</sup> He declared basically God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Bruggemann. *“The Land. Overtures to Biblical Theology”* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress: 2002),4

<sup>2</sup> David Ostendorf. *“Theological Perspective of Lk 6:17-26.* In: Eds, D Bartlett, B Brown-Taylor Feasting on the Word. Yr C, Vol 1. (Louisville: WJKP; 2009), 356-10)

program. It cannot but remind one of the Magnificat, Mary's song (Lk 1:45-47). Remember it?

*"My soul magnifies the Lord...who has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. He has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."* It's was, once again, an explanation of the grand reversal of things, the necessary upside-down way that things need to be from the way things are.

Jesus began with what are known as the Beatitudes, the Blessings. He unequivocally promised contentedness, peace to those whom the world cursed, whom the world had convinced had somehow sinned and were reaping sin's consequences...the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the hated and excluded. What great comfort his words must have been to them, those suffering who were listening that day. But then Jesus flipped the tables and it was a scathing curse he gave to many others. He unequivocally pronounced adversities on them... the rich, the filled, the comfortable. Jesus described a future of woe for the ones who'd already "received their consolation," who were already full, who'd stuffed themselves with all that could be consumed, who'd satisfied their hunger. *"You,"* Jesus said, *"shall know emptiness and tears"*.

Jesus was not saying that the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the excluded were better than others, morally or religiously, but he was promising them an unburdened state for they were in a place where they had nowhere to turn but to God. They necessarily trusted God as their source of strength and this is the place of right relationship...of blessing. The solidarity that Jesus showed with them is what has been termed by contemporary liberation theologians as Jesus' preferential option for the poor.<sup>3</sup> *An example: around the time of the 1994 elections, Rev. Tom Long was doing some academic research in S. Africa. It was a difficult time in that nation. The country was struggling to create a free society for people of different races. One Sunday night, he drove into Pretoria, the administrative capital. He describes it as an impressive city of steel and glass, with imposing government centers and modern universities. As he drove into the downtown area, he was stunned to see a small congregation of black Christians worshipping inside the green circle of an expressway ramp. He said, "The contrast could not have been*

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<sup>3</sup>Gustavo Gutierrez. *"Song of Deliverance"* as quoted by R. Allen Culpepper in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 145.

*more stark. Here, against the skyline of the great governmental city, the strong symbol for the bitter years of apartheid, was a tiny group of those who had been denied standing in the society. Here, in the shadow of the capital of a nation built on gold and diamonds and ivory, was a poor band of Christians with no building, no pews, no paid clergy, no musical instruments save tambourines ... Pretoria stood majestically, the embodiment of the present power. The little flock danced and sang and praised the God of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>4</sup>*

“Blessed are you,” Jesus said.

To the contrary, people who had satisfied themselves with things like money or popularity or power or beauty or instant gratification were by definition placing their security and trust in these things. The more they had of these things, the more likely they were to worship at their altars, and the more isolated and independent they’d become.<sup>5</sup> The self-righteous, the self-satisfied, the self-indulgent were the ones who’d wander in the desert of disconnection.<sup>6</sup> The woes, were said not as judgments, but as compelling, shocking invitations. They were said to warn those who listened that day and those who’ve listened ever since.

In essence, paraphrasing, Jesus said, *“Woe to you if you are spending your life chasing wealth, if a full belly and bank account have the highest priority for you, if you do not know the deep hunger of your own heart for God, a hunger which should lead you to feed your hungry neighbor. Woe to you if you laugh and don’t care that there are some who have never smiled, if you do not weep over the suffering of your friend.”<sup>7</sup> Woe to you if what people think of you is more important than standing up for the truth, if reputation and status, even if based on falsehoods, is the measure of success for you, for this may be all you end up having.* Jesus invited his disciples then and now to think hard about how to adjust priorities. Note that the woes were written in the future tense while the blessings were written in the present tense.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas G. Long, “Preaching God’s Future: The Eschatological Context of Christian Proclamation,” in *Sharing Heaven’s Music: The Heart of Christian Preaching*, Barry L. Callen, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 202.

<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Campbell. “Blessed” <http://www.fouthchurch.org/sermons/2004/021504.html> (accessed 2/15/19).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Renninger. “Turned Upside Down” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6hd0ButIsQ> . (accessed 2/15/19).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Renninger. “Turned Upside Down”

There was/is opportunity given for change....for change to step onto equal footing with each other, to stand on level ground with one's neighbor.

Rev. Karoline Lewis says, *that "standing on the same level as those whom you've deemed less-than, or with whom you've deemed more-than, is almost too much to imagine, too much to bear, because at the end of the day, it's just not how the world works"*. We have done either of two things. We have either *"so elevated the popular, the important, that which is and those whom are determined as better, those demonstrably beyond our reach, it's almost as if we have no perspective, at least no perspective of a level plain"....* Or *"our own implicit biases have prescribed those in the valleys, those acceptable to look down upon, or those just deemed less than"....* Either of these... *"and the plain reminds us of how much we don't feel right to be on the same level as others."* *"As soon as we start to see ourselves on the same level,"* she says, *"we start to wonder—where should we cast our gaze? Up? Or down? We start to wonder why it is so hard to look sideways. To look around us, beside us, in front of us".<sup>8</sup>*

True. So, this is where we need to think again about "place". We read that *"Jesus came down and stood on a level place with them"*. *"JESUS came DOWN and stood on a level place WITH them"*. He was there too. Jesus did not stand above them to lecture. He didn't perch up on the mountain and preach from up there. It wasn't only they who were shoulder to shoulder. He came to be with them where they were, on the level. He was in their midst, with them. And THAT is important. Why? Because being with someone where they are connects. It joins. It adds. It supports. It relates. Think of what it means when you hear a friend say, *"I will be with you"*. Or *"Do you want to go with me?"* Jesus came to be with them. He came to be with them all. For all were in need in one way or another. All were in need. The Poor were in need. And those who ignored the Poor were in need. And as a loving parent...as a loving parent, God incarnate lifted up the lowly and chastised those who needed redirection.<sup>9</sup> Brothers and sisters, Jesus' being WITH the physically ill and troubled spiritually, those from poor rural fishing communities and those from the prosperous port cities, the many that day on the plain,

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<sup>8</sup> Karoline Lewis. "A Level Plain Perspective." <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.asp?post=5287> (accessed 2/15/19).

<sup>9</sup> David Lose. "Epiphany 6C: "With!" <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/02/epiphany-6-c-with/> (accessed 2/16/19).

witnesses that “we are joined not by our strength or tribe or gifts or predilections or prejudices or fears—despite the efforts of many to convince us otherwise—but by our need. And, through our need by God’s favor for us”.<sup>10</sup> We are joined by our need and by our God with us.

*When Candice Payne learned that dozens of homeless people were stranded outside during Chicago’s recent polar vortex, she immediately charged 30 hotel rooms to her credit card to get them out of the cold, according to the New York Times. “It was 50 below, and I knew they were going to be sleeping on ice and I had to do something,” she said in an interview with the Times. After Payne’s initial down payment of several hundred dollars, she asked for further help through a post on Instagram and received enough support from people across the country to pay for a total of 60 rooms through the rest of the week, when temperatures were expected to rise. “We don’t get that type of help,” one of the homeless men, Jermaine, told CBS Chicago. The spontaneous act of charity attracted other volunteers in the area, who chipped in to bring food and supplies to the rooms, and even set up makeshift kitchens in some of the hotel rooms. “I am a regular person. It all sounded like a rich person did this, but I’m just a little girl from the South Side,” Ms. Payne told the Times. “I thought it was unattainable, but after seeing this and seeing people from all around the world help, that just tells me that it’s not that unattainable. We can all do this together,” she added.<sup>11</sup>*

“Jesus, friends, came down to be with them that day so long ago and stood on a level place... of course he did. So that we might, too.”<sup>12</sup> (repeat) Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> David Lose. “Epiphany 6C: “With!”

<sup>11</sup> Joe McCarthy. “Chicago Woman Who Paid for Hotel Rooms for Homeless Now Wants to Buy Them.” <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/woman-hotel-homeless-chicago/> (accessed 2/15/19).

<sup>12</sup> David Lose. “Epiphany 6C: “With!”