

Luke 6:17-26  
February 13, 2022

## A Level Place

When I think of level places, I am reminded of highways in Illinois that seem to go on forever without veering to the right or the left or ascending or descending, or at least it seems that way. I also think of balance, having a center. When things are out of balance, off-center, then trouble is at hand. There are problems to be solved. The term, “level-headed,” also arises, referring to someone who is in touch with the reality around them, who has good judgement, makes good decisions and can be trusted.

In the Gospel of Luke, our primary gospel companion through this liturgical year, when the material we ordinarily associate with The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel appears, we find Jesus and his followers instead on a, “level place.” Sometimes it is called, “The Sermon on the Plain.”

A mountain alludes to what is high and lifted up, transcendent, sacred. In this case it is also a reference to Moses on the mountain receiving the commandments. Jesus is presented as a new lawgiver. The Sermon on the Plain offers a different perspective, of straight and level pathways for the journey ahead.

In any case, in both gospels, the beginning is beatitude, and that is where we also begin. Right from the start one notices both similarities and differences between the more familiar words in Matthew and what

is found in Luke. It begins, “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.”

Right away, the similarity is noted, this is a beatitude, an easily remembered statement about how to be happy in life, and it has the word that means, “poor,” in it. It is clear that it is the same beatitude that begins the Sermon on the Mount, one also notices that the words, “in spirit,” are not present in Luke’s version. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” emphasizes humility, or something like it. “Blessed are the poor,” emphasizes poverty.

And then Luke goes on to strike a greater distinction between present life and the life to come. Here we find a series of blessings and woes, listen as I set them side by side:

Blessed are those who hunger now . . .

Woe to the well-fed

Blessed are those who weep now . . .

Woe to those who laugh now . . .

Blessed are you when people hate you . . .

Woe to you when people speak well of you . . .

I am a little unnerved by some of this; for I have always been well-fed and have known laughter, and I believe that being hated is overrated. Sometimes those who are attracted to angry confrontation, seem the opposite of what it means to be level-headed, even realistic, blessed.

It is easier to hunger and thirst for righteousness than to simply be hungry and thirsty, well, maybe. But I certainly would rather be fed now and know laughter now and be highly regarded by others; than to be in hunger, and in tears, and to be hated. Luke's version of the teaching of Jesus is provocatively extreme, and that is saying something, given some of what is in the Sermon on the Mount.

The idea of a reversal of fortunes before everything is said and done is present in other places in the bible, in Luke it is emphasized: those who suffer for doing right and good will be blessed and happy. Those who seek honor and pleasure and to avoid suffering especially when it requires them to sacrifice the right and the good, well, things will not turn out so well.

Like in the first psalm, which was our call to worship this morning, there is no room for ambiguity here. There is no grey. Life experience, on the other hand, sometimes places us in morally ambiguous situations where the right and the good are not clear. The journey is not always like an Illinois interstate, level and straight. We learn to make difficult decisions with these instructions in mind. Although it is theoretical, sort of academic in nature, the following seems about right:

That one should seek justice and do good, in so far as it is in their power; and be mindful of the larger community and seek to help solve its problems and not cause them, and act in the spirit of love and

friendship, fairness and goodwill, and health. Maybe there is a better description, but one gets the idea.

If a person were to live this way, and be rewarded with a good living and the high regard of their neighbors and the respect of strangers, that is okay, but the rewards should not be sought or be a factor in the moral and ethical decision-making process.

If, on the other hand, a person should try to live in this way, and as a result suffer hardship and disdain from other people, if hunger and thirst and tears be the outcome, that is okay too, tragic, but okay. No thought should be given in the decision-making process to the avoidance of these outcomes.

The person of faith should always live for the right and the good, no matter the result, positive or negative. Seeking suffering for its own sake is not healthy. Neither is avoiding it at all costs.

Thankfully, these two versions of Jesus teaching are not the last gospel word. Though it turns out that the gospel demands are greater than human beings achieve, the gospel word for us today is that when we fail we are met not with condemnation, but with mercy. We are offered help in each new life situation that comes our way, so that we can learn from these teachings, set aside past failures and successes, and live out these difficult days faithfully, as we journey towards heaven, together, on ever-increasingly level paths.