

February 13, 2022 – Sixth Sunday of Epiphany

¹⁷[Jesus] came down with [the twelve] 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. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

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

²¹“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

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

²²“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice 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.

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

²⁵“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.

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

Welcome to the level place.

Look around and it's hard to see who's here.

Other than that there are many.

Jesus preached to an odd gathering on that even ground, as Luke recounts. A great multitude who had come to an out-of-the-way and not-all-that-impressive locale to be

healed and to hear his message. There were people from all over the land of God's chosen people, the Jews. From Jerusalem in particular, that holy city. But strangely, also from Tyre and Sidon, who Luke treats neutrally, but Matthew had made a point to note was an evil place, deserving of destruction, when Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount.

Here on the plain, this vision of Mary, this teaching of Jesus, of a great leveling of the playing field: we get a glimpse.

It strikes us oddly today, I bet, for a few reasons. Not least of which is the strangeness of being in a crowd, pressed up against strangers. Breathing all over one another. Some of us wouldn't go for such a festival concert kind of scene to begin with, nevertheless during a pandemic. Others have long been longing for when this can be done again safely.

But who is in this crowd? For those who can't see over the top of everybody's heads, the narrative gives us a sense. There are country folk, there are city folk. There are people of absurd wealth, there are the destitute uncertain when and how they will get their next meal. There are hurting people in need of healing. There are the tormented. But also, I think we can presume there are people of middling, average means. There are the healthy who brought a loved one to be healed and those who are just curious onlookers. There are people from small towns and cities ... a little bit country and a little bit rock-and-roll.

There's a little bit of ... well, everyone. That's a funny thing to imagine nowadays, too, perhaps. We tend to avoid crowds, and well, the biggest crowd I have joined since this all started would have been last August at a Mariners game. Nice day, roof open, masks on ... a risk I knew, but a calculated one. 28,207 on hand in a stadium a little more than

half full. Belief hadn't caught on yet like it did in late September that maybe, maybe this was the year the playoff drought ends.

The crowd had some diversity, sure, in terms of age, ethnicity, even national origin. Canadians largely weren't allowed in yet but there were a fair amount of expats, I suppose they were, sporting gear for the visiting Toronto Blue Jays, visiting from Buffalo, New York, last summer, as pandemic logistics dictated.

But um ... have you purchased a ticket for a professional sporting event in recent years? Baseball is probably the most reasonable but beyond admission ... hot dogs, soda or beer, ferry fare, parking. The poor were decidedly not present.

Scenes like on that plain are not common. We live in a world that has largely sorted itself out and has been socially distancing before it was cool. There are rich neighborhoods

and poor, wealthy zip codes and not. Blue cities, red counties. Highly developed nations and a Global South.

It takes intentionality, purpose, a determination to come together and be shoulder-to-shoulder with people who aren't much like us. And the virus accommodations we have made for the past two years rule it out altogether in many cases.

But the pandemic won't last forever. Its days are numbered, though that precise number is still a mystery to all but perhaps God.

Yet there was a virus-like phenomenon coursing through our world well before COVID-19 appeared. One of complacency and resignation. One of resistance to change that improves many lives. One of tunnel vision, where people blinded themselves to what was going on beyond what was directly in front of us.

Peel away the problematic pandemic and ... well, back to normal serves as a trap. Going back to that prior status quo, a shrug offered to “it is what it is.”

But Jesus offers a startling shake out of being stuck. Blessings, honor, he says, be upon the impoverished with no way out of it in sight. You aren't ignored. You are seen. You are loved. I see you, Jesus says, of course, but in so doing, he also demands the eyes of those who can do something to help look directly across at them, not downward. These are your neighbors, and no, you are no better than them.

Happy are the hungry for they will be filled. This existence is not forever and the ability exists for it to be remedied. Do not give up hope. And hear the acknowledgment of God who has not abandoned you, Jesus says.

Honor, blessings to the crying, the weeping, the sad, the grieving, the depressed. Maybe here the black-and-white

dichotomy breaks down, for there are surely the economically comfortable and well-fed who nonetheless are broken down, beaten down by the world. It will not always feel this way, Jesus promises.

And blessings and jubilation for those who are doing God's work, trying to live into Jesus' call, and yet are running into walls at every turn, disheartened by the seeming futility of it all. It's not in vain and the God of Jeremiah sees into the desires of your hearts.

But woe, woe indeed, to the rich who feel entitled to the comfort those riches bring. For that comfort does not last. If ill-gotten, you must see now in the level place what your gain has wrought upon whose backs it was earned. For those convicted by Jesus' words, Professor Ronald Allen points out that the word "level" in the Hebrew Bible comes up repeatedly from the prophets in reference to "places of

corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning.”

Welcome to how the other half lives. The blinders are removed now and there is no denying these things.

WARNING to the full-bellied who have dismissed the undernourished as undeserving. Heads up(!) to the content, the unconcerned, for the troubles of the traumatized will visit you in due time. And watch out(!) to those whose greatest concern is their reputation. For shame will make its way to you, your motivations are known to God.

If we could be gathered in a cross section of “the real world” right now, a collection sort of like Jesus’ first hearers but in our time and place, I think we could look at one another and see similar shock in one another’s eyes. Fear and trembling in some. Awe and exhilaration in others. A mix of butterflies and confusion in our own guts and on the faces of others. We are being called out. And called in to blessing

and woe, of playing a part in the uncomfortable process of finding level common ground amongst many differences and barriers that aren't always tangible.

We are invited to hear these both uplifting and challenging words of Jesus much as Luke invited his audience, Theophilus, to consider them. Theophilus, it is likely, was a rich, comfortable, well-fed Greek benefactor who put some of his wealth to use in publishing Luke's Gospel so it could be spread to a wider audience. And yet Luke sought not to flatter them but make them conscious of what costs came along with entering into the realm of a disruptive and demanding God.

We are to be conscious, too, that a post-pandemic world will be, at least in some regards, even less level than it had been before. That there will be poorer poor, hungrier hungry, sadder sad and further outcast. And while this will sometimes meet us face to face, it will also sometimes be

hidden and we will be called by God not to deny it. That the ministry of the church can only Band-Aid so much and must be attentive to rooting out structural sin and injustice to be authentic to the Gospel.

But I also know that many of us are tired. That we are already reaching and are in some cases beyond what we are equipped to handle. With that, I want to note that the first thing Jesus does when he comes down to this level plain among the varied masses is to heal. There is no mention of any distinction he makes among those to whom he makes available his healing power. To hear blessing, warning, both or either, a healing touch is first applied. And I think we can all reach out to ask for healing to help ready us for the next chapter in the story of our community and ministry together as church.

Let us pray.

God of the level places, we are not all on an even keel. We have struggled mightily and part of that struggle is to trust you. To believe you really are in control and we won't always just be stuck. Help us not to rely on our own clouded and insufficient understanding but to be open to your ways of seeing and acting in this world. Heal us ... from all the hurt of loneliness, isolation, disconnection from one another and from you that we have experienced. Give us courage to meet the challenges of our neighbors in need and not to keep your blessings to ourselves, to deny them or to fail to heed your warnings to us about complacent attitudes and inaction. We ask your healing touch on all that is broken in us and those around us in Jesus' powerful and holy name. Amen.