

February 17, 2019

Luke 6: 17-26

Prayer: We thank you that we are able to be in this place together. Please be with us as we try to discern your word in our day. In the holy name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

On a Level Place

In 2012, my book, *The Weight of Mercy*, came out. It was about my first few years at Triune, and I got a few invitations to preach and lead workshops in the Carolinas, Georgia, upstate New York.

Then one day early in 2014, I was sitting in my office and opened an email. It was an invitation from the minister at Memorial Church on the Harvard University campus asking me to preach there in October. I shot off an email saying , “Sure!”

Then I sat back and said, “Wait a minute.”

By that time, I’d been scammed by the best of them. I’d given peanut butter for children to people who had no children.

I’d given rides and money to pastors to get home to churches that didn’t exist.

I’d given out cat food that ended up in crack houses.

So that day in my office, I Googled the Harvard web site and saw that the minister mentioned in my email looked right. The university logo looked right. But that’s what a good scammer does.

And so I called Vince and told him that I was pretty sure a bunch of Harvard undergrads were perpetuating a hoax and inviting 50 or 100 preachers from the hinterlands.

We'd all show up at Harvard this same Sunday in October thinking we were going to preach, and they'd all have a great laugh.

And Vince said, "Well, maybe. But I'm not sure you can just assume that."

He's been married to me for a long time.

Well, weeks went by. I finally worked up my nerve and went online to get a phone number for the minister's assistant who purportedly initiated the email. I called her and asked if she'd sent an invitation for me to preach.

She said, "Of course, and we're so glad you can make it. Why?"

And I mumbled and stumbled around and finally blurted, "I thought it might be a hoax."

Well, then, of course, she really did think they'd invited Granny Clampett.

So Vince and I flew to Cambridge, and I taught a Sunday school class, then preached at Memorial Church. Because it turned out that its minister, Jonathan Walton, is an Atlanta native who is very familiar with the landscape in which Triune operates. And the theology he teaches as both a faculty member of Harvard Divinity School and as minister of the campus church, is very much our theology.

While we were there, he had us to dinner at his house, and he and Vince talked about the Boston Celtics and how Jonathan had attended Wofford one year and how he'd even looked at Furman. And as soon as we got on the plane to come home, Vince said, "You need to invite him to Triune."

I responded, "Vince, he does not want to come to Greenville."

For four years we had that conversation. Until finally last spring , just to prove Vince wrong, I invited him. So Jonathan will preach at Triune next Sunday morning.

I don't want to tromp all over his message, but I imagine he will speak about how he views the Bible through a lens of love. That's the title of his latest book: *A Lens of Love*.

And it has to do with the way we read our Holy Scripture. Too many people get caught up in the cultural mores of its ancient setting and adapt the wrong things to modern life.

They read its pre-historic creation stories and they read about tribal warfare and slavery and marginalized women and apply *these* parts of the stories to modern life. When what we should be doing is reading these ancient texts through a lens of love, through, in fact, the words of the gospel writer Luke:

“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10: 27)

I plan to be on the front row next Sunday morning, taking notes. I hope you will be with us, too.

How perfect in light of our upcoming guest is this week's Scripture passage from Luke. It's about a sermon that Jesus once preached.

I imagine there have been millions of words written and preached from Jesus's original sermon. But I think that fully as important as what he said ... was where he said it.

Luke tells us that Jesus preached this sermon on “a level place.”

When we see the sermon reported by Matthew, Matthew tells us that Jesus preached it on a mountain. Indeed, we know it best as the Sermon on the Mount. And in Matthew, it's four times longer than in Luke.

Matthew and Luke, who were writing all this down maybe 40 to 50 years after it happened, are almost certainly pulling from the same sermon. But they put Jesus's words in different contexts.

Matthew had Jesus preach on a mountain in order to link him to Moses, who ascended a mountain to get the Ten Commandments. It is a way to picture Jesus as the new Moses, a hero and prophet the Jews would be very familiar with.

Luke pictures Jesus going up on a mountain to pray and to call his 12 apostles out of the bigger pool of disciples who were following him. Then Jesus and those 12 came *down* to meet with the people and the rest of the disciples to hear Jesus' message. *Down to a level place.*

There is no doubt in my mind that Matthew and Luke are using these geographical settings for a theological purpose.

For Matthew – who had Jesus' birth announced to lofty Magi from the East – Jesus is one who speaks from a mountaintop, in the manner of Moses.

For Luke – who had Jesus' birth announced to lowly shepherds – Jesus is one who joins the crowds on “a level place.”

I think Luke is drawing us a picture of a Savior who joins us, who comes to dwell on this level place we call Earth where diseases and evil spirits and hunger and poverty reside.

Let's turn to **Luke 6: 17-26** and read how he presents this sermon by Jesus.

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. 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.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

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

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

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

'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to

the prophets.

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

‘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.

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

Matthew wants us to read the Sermon on the Mount and think of Moses.

Luke wants us to read it and think of ... us.

The people who heard Jesus’ words were from Judea and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.
In other words, they were both Jews and Gentiles. This is a statement of inclusivity.

They came because they were diseased and troubled by evil spirits, and they thought
Jesus could heal them.

Could there be a better description of why we come to this place? This neighborhood
is a place of disease and trouble and yes, sometimes of outright evil. We come into this
sanctuary with the hope that Jesus can heal us.

In January, we read about Jesus preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth. He unrolled
the scroll of Isaiah and read: **“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed
me to bring good news to the poor.”** (Isaiah 61: 1 and Luke 4: 18)

Now it's time to bring it home – to bring that good news to the poor. He gives us four blessings and four woes, tightly linked together. We're not going to re-read all of them. But I want to talk about this first one because it's a puzzler.

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

Now this can be a dangerous statement when we don't read it through a lens of love. In the mouths of slave owners, for instance, this passage was used to keep slaves quiet with the promise of a better life to come. The rich can use it to prevent the poor from wanting their fair share of an economy.

But in Jesus' words, the kingdom of God carries both present and future dimensions. There is a sense in which he is saying the kingdom of God is *already here* and available to the poor.

It's a little clearer to see in Eugene Peterson's contemporary translation, called “The Message.” He writes: **“You're blessed when you've lost it all. God's kingdom is there for the finding.”**

In this wording, the loss or the absence of material possessions makes it easier, perhaps, to find the kingdom of God. Without the trappings or distractions of wealth, we are freer to seek and find it.

Now here's the matching woe: **“It's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get.”**

The common theme seems to be that it's not riches or the poverty per se, but what each does to our thinking. **"It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."** (Luke 18: 25)

You know, I have so many people tell me, "It must be hard to minister at Triune." But I think it's easier than it would be in a wealthy church.

We are able to strip things down and ignore the trappings. It's nice to be able to point to Jesus' commands to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, preach the good news to the poor, and say, "That's our manual. That's our instruction book. I don't see anything about a gym or a bridal parlor. "

The third set of blessings and woes concerns weeping and laughing : Here's The Message: **"You're blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the morning."** And **"it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it."**

As I mentioned earlier, I spent nearly two weeks in San Diego with my younger daughter Madison after her knee surgery. So we spent a good deal of time piled into her king-size bed, binge watching Netflix.

Our favorite was *Grace and Frankie*, which happened to be set right there in San Diego and La Jolla. Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin star as two women who are divorced at 70, when their husbands come out as gay and marry each other.

Though clearly told through a lens of comedy, it deals with aging and abandonment and cheating and lying. Maybe more than any show I've ever watched, it's a wonderful

depiction of the comedy and tragedy, of the joy and sorrow, of the weeping and laughter Jesus talked about.

That's what life is.

And if there's one lesson in *Grace and Frankie*, if there's one lesson in the Sermon on a Level Place, it is this: *Life will not always be as it is today.*

Life will not always be as it is today.

I think for some of us, that is a critical message, perhaps the most important message we can hear. Our current situation, the fact that we might live in an abandoned auto shop or in the woods or in an emergency shelter in no way means that our lives will always be this way. The fact that we are sick or grieving or lonely in no way means that we will always be this way.

In placing Jesus's sermon "on a level place," Luke emphasizes that Jesus has come down to live among the people, to speak among the people. He's not up high, speaking down.

He's on the bus with us.

That is such an important distinction.

A year or two ago, our entire staff visited the Dream Center in Easley. The Dream Center is headquartered in an abandoned elementary school where they hold classes in which people can earn Dream Dollars to buy things they need.

They also operate Opportunity Village, a collection of very nice tiny homes with foundations and porches and fences and streetlights. People who are attending classes and working on goals can get a tiny house.

When the director, Chris Wilson, spoke to us, she used the same words and even same gestures that we use.

“It’s all about establishing relationship,” she said. “A donor-recipient relationship is never going to work because it’s no relationship at all. We have to create a level playing field where everyone is allowed to bring their gifts to the table.”

Gifts of volunteerism, of art, of music, of theater, of greeting new guests at Round Table. Gifts of serving lunch or serving communion or taking up the offering.

We meet each other most authentically on a level place.

Which is exactly where we meet Jesus. Amen.