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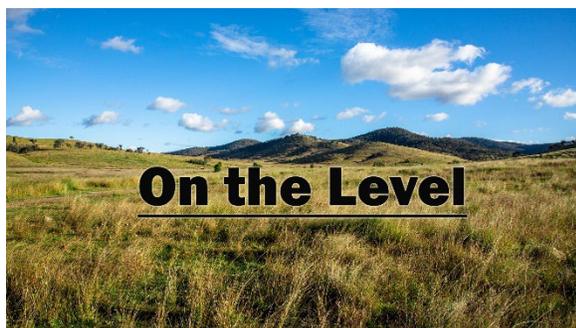
Title: On the Level

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Text: [Luke 16:17-26](#)

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On the Level

Last week, we began looking at the ministry of Jesus as conveyed by the gospel writer named Luke. We found Jesus calling the first of his disciples – Simon, James, and John – and them leaving everything behind to follow him. Even though there's not much time between last week's reading in chapter five and this week's reading in

chapter six, Jesus' ministry has taken shape quickly.

He's gone about getting his ministry off the ground. He's healed a leper and a paralytic. He called Levi, also known as Matthew, who was a tax collector, to join the group. Just like Simon, James, and John last week, Levi left everything and followed Jesus but not before having Jesus over to his house and inviting his tax collector buddies to have dinner with them. This is the first time we see some alarm bells going off with the Pharisees, the keepers of the law.

Jesus was beginning to cross some well-defined boundaries of the religious leaders. He extended a call of discipleship and offered the intimacy of table fellowship to people that were on the outside of society. The Pharisees question him about who he eats with, when he eats with them, and what he does on the sabbath. By the time we get to today's passage, all twelve of the apostles are in place – Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, another James, Simon (not the Peter Simon), and two named Judas – one famous and the other less so.

Today's passage is the introduction to a new major section of the book of Luke. While previous passages have dealt with the early ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus, and have only referred to the teachings of Jesus, here, for the first time, the actual content of his teaching to the crowds is presented. Also, for the first time, Jesus' teachings are addressed directly to his disciples.

Today's reading is part of Luke's compilation of Jesus' sayings and teaching. Like Matthew has done, Luke collects the sayings of Jesus and arranges them in what we've called a sermon. Much of this material is also found in the much more famous Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Luke's less familiar version is known as the "Sermon on the Plain," because Jesus "came down with them, and stood on a level place." (Luke 6:17). We'll take two weeks – today and next week – to examine the important teachings of the sermon on the plain.

The different geographic settings of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke likely have to do with the individual writers' emphasis. The book of Matthew was closely connected with Jewish elements in the early church, so that book presented Jesus in the imagery of Moses. What did Moses do? He brought the Torah from the mountain, so Jesus now brought the new authority from a mountain in Matthew.

For Luke, the topography serves a different role. The mountain was a place of piety and worship, the place Jesus retreated to pray and where God was encountered. For Jesus to be on the mountain to pray, and then return to "a level place" was Luke's way to anchor Jesus' actions in communion with God but also a way to identify him with crowds on the level of ordinary, everyday human existence. The issue for Luke was not authority, but the implications of Jesus' ministry in everyday life. Prayer and piety are a crucial foundation for his work, but the real arena for Jesus' work is the "level place" where the crowds are milling. It is there, on the level place, that people are hurting, struggle and are looking for hope.¹

Scholars much smarter than me weigh the other distinctions between the version from Matthew and the one from Luke. Among the possibilities are:

- the Sermon on the Plain is Luke's summary of the Sermon on the Mount;
- the Sermon on the Mount is Matthew's expansion of the Sermon on the Plain;
- the two sermons were given on different occasions but Jesus reused material.

That last one is the one I like – not for any scholarly reason but I'd like to think that Jesus is a little like me in my preaching. You get some good material and you're going to use it multiple times – hit it again and again.

Luke's version of this sermon has 33 verses. Matthew's has 111. That said, Luke includes some distinctive material, such as the people present and what is called the "woes." First, the people - three groups of people are

present: (1) the apostles – the 12 that he'd just called. (2) a great crowd of disciples – disciples, in this case, are followers who've begun to believe in his ministry – many more than 12 and, number (3) a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ²

Those places mentioned in verse 17 are an interesting mix. Judea is the southern province where Jerusalem is located. It is the home of the temple and the most orthodox Jewish leaders. It represents the religious status quo which is also Jesus' opposition. Tyre and Sidon, by contrast, are Gentile cities on the coast just north of Capernaum. Their mention suggests the presence of Gentiles among the crowd at the Sermon on the Plain. Taken together, these four places emphasize the breadth of Jesus' ministry—from far north to far south—from orthodox Jews to Gentiles.

Now, about the content of the sermon itself. Matthew's sermon gives us only blessings – nine of them. Luke has carefully paired four blessings with four woes or curses, even using the same words in the corresponding pairs. Luke draws the contrast in the pairs between groups of people: (1) poor - rich, (2) hungry - full, (3) those who weep - those who laugh, and (4) those who are hated - those of whom people speak well.

In Luke, with the "woes," Jesus turns his attention to the powerful, the popular, the beautiful people of that day. Just beyond the crowd of hurting people who had come to be healed by Jesus, there were the social and religious powerbrokers who had come to examine Jesus — and Jesus has a word for them, too. This is from the Message version and may be easier to understand since we don't use the word "woe" so much anymore – it uses "trouble."

"But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get. And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long. 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. There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular." (Luke 6:24-26 Message)

There was only one sermon that day. There was only one crowd. But the people who made up that crowd came from different places geographically and found themselves at different places in their lives. The people heard Jesus' sermon and there was something for everyone. The poor felt encouraged, but the wealthy felt judged. The hungry went away hopeful, but the well-fed went away worried about the future. A wise mentor once told

me that every time a preacher steps into a pulpit, there is never just one audience present, or just one sermon preached. You will leave this place today and every one of you will have heard a different sermon.

Leith Anderson, a pastor, shared an experience he had as a boy. He grew up outside of New York City and was an avid fan of the old Brooklyn Dodgers. One day his father took him to a World Series game between the Dodgers and the Yankees. He was so excited, and he just knew the Dodgers would trounce the Yankees. Unfortunately for him, the Dodgers never got on base, and his excitement was shattered. Years later he was engrossed in a conversation with a man who was a walking sports almanac. Leith told him about the first major league game he attended and added, "It was such a disappointment. I was a Dodger fan and the Dodgers never got on base." The man said, "You were there? You were at the game when Don Larsen pitched the first perfect game in all of World Series history" Leith replied, "Yeah, but uh, we lost." He then realized – he had missed the profound importance of the game because of what he wanted to get out of it.³

I come to the pulpit today - like every other Sunday - wondering what you need to hear today, knowing all too well that everyone is different. Do you need a blessing, or do you need a woe? Do you need a pat on the back, or do you need a kick in the backside? What would Jesus have us take with us from this sermon from the plain from so long ago? Whether our lives are fractured or whole, whether we are filled with delight or despair, I believe that Jesus has a message for all of us.

Just like every other Sunday, I hope that today something will pique your interest, or that something will offend you, or that something will make you wonder, or that something will want to make you take a deeper dive. Jesus knew that when he preached the sermon on the plain – it was comforting to those who needed comfort and wholly uncomfortable to those who were too comfortable. That's always my goal.

These words of Jesus are promises to those who are suffering in this world that God still sees them, loves them, and is intent on their thriving. Jesus' words are also warning calls to his hearers that they are called to live with attention and generosity toward their neighbors, even as God is attentive and generous.

God is creating a world using us to make it happen. God is bringing it to life through us by that same power that emanated from Jesus. In many ways, our time mirrors the sermon on the plain. There are those who are hungry or mourning or poor or disregarded at the very same time that others are abundantly well-fed, rich, laughing, and respected. Jesus is saying that these

two opposite circumstances should not be able to live side in God's realm and we are called to address it in our own lives and our world.

The gospel was written for Christians living a generation or two after the first groups of believers had gathered. In this teaching of Jesus, as so often in his gospel, Luke reminds his hearers that they are all called to continue to live lives that are "rich toward God" no matter how long it seems to be taking for God's reign to be fully present. That is an important word for us.

The "wealth gap," the "food deserts," the "education gap," the "health and health care gap," and myriad other gaps and failures around the globe mark the two sides of the blessings and woes in the sermon on the plain. These gaps are what we are called to address by this sermon of Jesus. It's what children of God do and what we repent of not having done, confident that God gives new opportunities to live with generosity and pay attention to the gaps among us.

This first major teaching to the disciples must have come somewhat unexpectedly. I can only imagine what they were thinking. Maybe Peter said, "Are we supposed to write this down?" Maybe Andrew asked, "Are we supposed to already know this?" James might have said, "Will we have a test on this?" Bartholomew might have asked, "Do we have to turn this in?" Maybe Matthew, "Can I use the restroom?" If you're wondering the same, you may have missed the point.

Here's the point – if it's all you take from this sermon – it will be enough. If you are uncomfortable, hurting in any way, God seeks to provide comfort to you. If you are too comfortable – that's trouble and God wants you to use your comfort for the good of those who need comfort. Wherever you find yourself this morning, know that God loves you. That was expressed in Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ Commentary information about location differences between Matthew and Luke found at "The Voice: Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians." Study from Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, February 17, 2018, <http://www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearC/Cepiphany6nt.html>.

² Information about audience and content from Bible commentary at <https://sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/new-testament-luke-617-26/>.

³ Illustration found at <https://www.mccormickumc.org/> with credit given to Dean Register in the Minister's Manual, 1995, p. 339.