

February 17, 2019 6th Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Luke 6:17-26

Karoline Lewis, A Level Plain Perspective, as found in Working Preacher posted on 2-11-19.
Richard Rohr (<https://cac.org/emotional-sobriety-2015-11-19>)

Preface to the Gospel reading:

As you listen to the Gospel reading this morning, listen for what makes you wonder—

I wonder why Jesus said that.

I wonder what it felt like to hear this.

And also listen for what you notice—

I notice that this makes me uncomfortable.

After I've read the gospel through once, I'll invite you into the conversation, the wondering, and the noticing.

The holy gospel according to Luke, the sixth chapter. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

Grace and peace to you, beloved ones, grace and peace.

So, there you have it.

Luke's version of Jesus' Beatitudes, the blessings.

Remember that Beatitudes show up twice: in Matthew's Gospel in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, and in Luke's Gospel, in the Sermon on the Plain, or on the level place, like we heard this morning.

In Matthew's Beatitudes, there are nine blessings, lovely, comforting, beautiful, requested for weddings and funerals.

In case you are curious, in Matthew's gospel, not a woe in sight.

Luke, on the other hand, has four blessings and four woes, carefully correlated, and once you get past the cool literary moves, and listen to the words, they are raw and real, honest and convicting.

And if you listen closely, especially in our contextual location, they can—really, they should—make us squirm.

In this sermon, Jesus is describing to the disciples the values held in God's kingdom, God's reign.

Today, to dig deeper, I invite you into what I call an "I wonder, I notice" sermon.

Some of you have experienced this before; for others, it's new.

In an "I wonder, I notice" sermon, we're all called to engage the scripture.

You've heard me read the Gospel once already.

In a few minutes I'll read it again, slowly.

Your job is to interrupt me—and I mean it.

Interrupt using a phrase that begins either “I wonder... (whatever you wonder)” or “I notice...”

[I'll repeat what you say so that it's amplified and all can hear it better.]

After that, another person may jump in with something they wonder or notice,
or I'll continue until I'm interrupted again.

So today it may sound like this at the beginning,

“Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place...”

I wonder where he was coming down from.

I wonder who was with Jesus.

Or, I notice they are on a level place.

Remember, only two rules...

1. There are no wrong answers, let the Spirit lead us.

You may feel like you don't know enough, but really those can be the best interruptions.

Your job is to interrupt... It only works if you do.

2. Use the structure. Begin your interruption with I wonder... or I notice...

Ready? Are your voices ready? My name is Jen; what's your name?

Thank you!

Let me share a few more things that I wondered or noticed in my preparation for today.

I notice that Jesus and the newly named disciples come down from that mountain

and Jesus talks with them on the plain, literally the level place.

Remember that Matthew sets these blessings on a mountain.

Isn't it interesting that in Luke we hear the blessings and woes on a plain?

I notice that there's something powerfully, uncomfortably, equalizing about being on a plain, a level place.

That's the point, isn't it? That it's leveling?

We're strangely wired to look for who is ahead of us, and who is behind.

We notice wealth and popularity and physical beauty, and they are lifted up in our culture.

And then there are those who our biases somehow make it ok to look down upon.

We ask questions like, "Is she worthy?"

We stir up storms of shame for ourselves and others.

Middle schoolers know these cultural rules... And the rest of us? We do too.

We're good at placing ourselves in the world's pecking order.

And yet in this radical, upside down teaching from Jesus, that's the point—

Karoline Lewis writes, "We don't get to stand on mountains or wallow in valleys.

Instead," Jesus calls us to create level places for God's way, God's values, to flourish.

I notice that Jesus seems to sense that the disciples will be tempted (like we are) to assign some as the blessed and some as worthy of woe.

Don't do it, he seems says, because my reign won't follow your rigid rules.

This isn't about categorizing people, it's about lifting-up values, living values.

The lines between blessings and woes can sometimes blur.

I notice that when Jesus says You,

Blessed are you who are poor, Blessed are you who weep, Woe to you...

It's always You All, it's plural in the original language, always plural.

These values are meant to be held as a community.

I wonder what this passage can teach us, how it is life-giving—

we with our relative wealth,

we with our fullness,

we who act like we can take care of ourselves, like we don't need one another, let alone God.

This week—as we live more deeply into hosting Families Moving Forward and the tensions of privilege and race and need this sometimes stirs....

This week—as we ponder our identity as a sanctuary congregation even as the president has declared a state of emergency at our border...

These words from Jesus can remind us, as Richard Rohr writes,

how easily our human hearts can deceive us.
Everything is alright, we want to say.
This injustice in our air like snow, it's just how it is.
No, Jesus cries in today's gospel, no.
There is another way and together we can follow—in our living and in our dying—we can follow, we can be transformed and made new.

Before I conclude, many of you have heard that Bob Felling died this week.

Just last Sunday we were praying for him, praying for healing.
He has struggled with his health over the last few years,
but his death on Monday was unexpected and devastating for his family and friends; Bob was just 56.
Bob's wife is Tami, and they have an adult son, Nick, and then two in high school: Josh and Kelsey.
Tami wrote of Bob for the eulogy: "Everything he did, he did for his family.
Bob was a decent person...honest and truthful...caring and helpful...gentle but strong.
His shoulders were broad and he carried all of us. He is deeply loved."
Blessed are those who weep.
On Friday we gathered here in this space in God's wide mercy for a funeral.

When members of this congregation die,

we remember how the waters that first washed over them in baptism, hold them now in death.
We pray at the baptismal font, linking ourselves to God's powerful waters of promise.

Holy God, holy and powerful, we remember before you today our brother Bob Felling. We thank you for giving him to us to know and to love as a companion in our pilgrimage on earth. At these waters of baptism, you welcomed him into your love. At these waters, you comforted him in times of trouble and encouraged him in delight. At these waters, you now enfold him into Jesus' death and resurrection and the promise of life everlasting. Console us who mourn and bring us together to feast with all the saints of God. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.