

February 13, 2022 6th Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

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

<https://www.startribune.com/minnesotas-coolest-backyard-ice-rinks-complete-with-floodlights-and-homemade-zambonis/600142278/> from 2-6-22
Star Tribune, by Rachel Hutton. Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus, posted on 2-6-22 called Leveled:
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3319-leveled> (Barbara Brown Taylor quote is from this piece, also Leveling idea is from this). Ideas from
Working Preacher and Sermon Brainwave, my own sermon from 2-17-19, and Karoline Lewis, A Level Plain Perspective, as found in Working
Preacher posted on 2-11-19.]

Grace, grace upon grace, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen

Level. To level. Leveling. That's the verb that's been on my mind this week: Leveling.

Maybe you saw the spread in last Sunday's Star Tribune about backyard ice hockey rinks.

Having quietly harbored a secret desire to drive a Zamboni,

I took some delight in this article with its pictures of homemade outdoor rinks,
ringed by trees, their bare, wintery branches silhouetted against the pinks and purples of sunset,
kids and kids-at-heart passing the puck.

The article described how atop lakes and in flooded backyards,
people around the state for years have created backyard ice rinks.

Even as the US Olympic teams vie for medals and a place on the podium,

there's an energy, a freedom, a leveling,
in games of pick-up hockey where people can join in simply for the love of playing.

Leveling.

Focused on the folks who create and keep up these rinks,

the reporter writes, "These rink builders—especially those with deluxe setups—
spend long, frozen nights melting and chipping ice bumps,
filling cracks, and standing out there with a garden hose.

They dream of the Zambonis their spouses won't let them buy

and settle for 'homebonis' they've MacGyvered out of hardware-store parts..."

Quite an image, don't you think? All for the sake of smoothing and leveling the ice.

In our Gospel this morning, we heard Luke's version of Jesus' Beatitudes, the blessings.

I say Luke's version, because it's Matthew's version that is so well known and so well-loved.

Matthew's beatitudes we call the Sermon on the Mount, a set of nine blessings, beautiful and poetic.

In contrast, Luke's version we call the Sermon on the Plain, literally, the sermon on "the level place."

Jesus has been on the mountain praying, the Spirit's power is palpable.

He's chosen his band of disciples and together they've come down to the level place.

The crowds are pressing in.

Why not? They've heard what Jesus can do, the healing, the curing of demons.

On that level space, Jesus begins to speak.

Where Matthew describes Jesus saying, Blessed are the *poor in spirit*,

Luke says blessed are the poor. Period.

And where Matthew says Blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*,

Luke says simply blessed are the hungry.

In Luke's telling, blessed are the poor, the hungry, the sad, the expendable, and
 woe, to us who are rich and full and happy and powerful. (adapted phrases from Debie Thomas)
Four blessings and four woes, carefully correlated.
Together they are raw and real, honest and convicting, leveling.

Truth is, this Gospel reading makes me squirm.

Leveling can do that, can't it?
For those of us who are comfortable,
 for those of us with an inkling or maybe a boatload of privilege, this gospel is pointed.
We look for a way around it, to soften its truth, loopholes to lighten our guilt and shame.
It must be figurative, right?
We humans who are prone to sub-consciously assessing the pecking-order, knowing our place,
 considering the winners podium, striving and seeking;
we who are schooled at categorizing the binaries: the blessed, the not so blessed,
 we get tripped up at times like this and it's hard to make sense of this gospel. Amen!

Friends, the upside down reign of God is so simple, so direct this morning.

And that, truth be told, can feel a little, or even a lot, unsettling.
Here, today, on that level place, Jesus chips away at our false narratives about ourselves and each other.
Jesus scrapes clean the truth about our identity and our worth.
He smooths out our need, for grace is ours,
 and he fills in our power, for there is much we can and should do.

It's helpful to notice a few things:

First, Jesus isn't telling us how to act, how to behave, rather he's simply noting the facts.

We might hear judgement, but that's our issue.

As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "the sermon 'is not advice at all.

 It is not even judgment. It is simply the truth about the way things work.'" (quoted by Debie Thomas)

Secondly, that word we read as Woe, is an interjection, like Hey.

It's meant to get their attention.
It's not a curse, like cursing someone out.
But more of a wakeup call,
 "This is what's happening.
 There's much to grieve.
 What are you going to do about it?"

Then, Jesus isn't addressing the blessings to some, and the woes to others.

He's not counting us off, 1s and 2s.
Rather, ultimately, all of it, the blessings and the woes, are for all of us.
Blessed are you when you are hungry, when you weep,
 for God will care for you, grace will cover you.
Woe, to you when you are full while others hunger and you find no way to share.
When we're full, but not full with God,

then we shut ourselves off from the suffering, the need, around us,
when we fail to use our power.

Reality is, tomorrow my woe may be my blessing, and my blessing my woe.

This willingness to acknowledge complexity is vital in this passage.

We're saints and sinners,
gifted and troubled.

Jesus comes to both comfort and to challenge.

We live in divisive times and it's easy to draw the battle lines more starkly than they really are.

Truth is, when we're open to some leveling,
we're able to comprehend the complexity, the nuance of this hot time in history,
and we're able to act with more compassion and empathy,
with less anger, less malice.

Finally, when Jesus says You,

"Blessed are you who are poor," "Blessed are you who weep," "Woe to you when you are full..."

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

These values are meant to be held as a community.

I find this communal sense helpful as we move into our annual meeting this afternoon.

As much as it can be unsettling,

the great leveling of Luke's sermon on the plain is something we need to hear in a time like this.

The extremes of this season are too much, too easily we dehumanize one another

when a little mutuality,
a little interdependence and shared humanity might pull us back from the brink.

Any of us could be Amir Locke, or that police officer.

Any of us could be the grieving parent of Deshaun Hill or Jahmari Rice,
or countless others who have died too soon.

The violence so blatant these last days is happening to us, to our shared humanity,
to our human family, in our broken systems.

Woe to us when we separate ourselves from the pain and grief, the anger and the change.

Yesterday afternoon I walked with our dog to a small lake near our home in north Minneapolis.

I'd seen a path on the ice but hadn't ventured onto it, this was my chance.

Turns out that path was ankle-twisting bumpy, in desperate need of some leveling.

Like many a-sidewalk,
the snow and wind, the thaw and freeze cycles, had done a number of that one-time-path.
A bit to the west I could see telltale signs of what probably was an ice rink for a brief period.
Now it was drifted over and rough, far from level.

Dear ones, this leveling takes vigilance and effort,

regular chipping away at the bumps and filling in the crevices,
attention to the blessings and the woes, the comfort and the challenge,

and it takes grace, Christ's grace, grace upon grace, for all that these days will bring.

This week we have lost two of our beloved ones in the Hope community.

Nita Anderson died on Wednesday morning, and Mike Fingerson died on Thursday evening.

Both had been in hospice care.

We knew this was coming and... it hurts.

This morning let me take a moment to share a little about Nita and then we'll pray.

Next week we'll do this for Mike, as well.

Both of these families are thinking about memorial services when the time is right.

For now, this time as a congregation offers solace and memories.

Nita's husband, Roger, and some of their family are with us today in the service.

Nita was born in Montevideo, Minnesota, the 2nd of 3 girls.

She was active in church and musical her whole life.

Nita attended Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter and met her beloved Roger in the Gustavus Choir.

She was a Freshman singing alto, Roger was a sophomore singing bass, it was the fall of 1957.

Over the years they moved around as Roger served different congregations.

For many years they were in Grand Rapids, Minnesota but they also lived in St. Paul and in Rock Island, Illinois.

Their cabin outside of Grand Rapids has continued to be a home base for their family and in retirement they'd spend the warmer months at the cabin, nearly half the year.

Nita was a teacher, a middle school and high school German teacher.

She was physically active, and particularly enjoyed walking.

She was a voracious reader.

And her love of music, never ceased. She sang in the Hope Choir and many other choirs.

Roger and Nita were married for 59 ½ years, they have 3 children, and had 6 grandchildren.

She was 83 years old.

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 waters, linking ourselves to God's powerful waters of promise.

Holy God, holy and powerful, we remember before you today our sister Nita Anderson. We thank you for giving her to us to know and to love as a companion in our pilgrimage on earth. At the waters of baptism, you welcomed her into your love. At these waters, you comforted her in times of trouble and encouraged her in delight. At these waters, you now enfold her 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' mercy we pray. Amen.