

Standing on Level Ground

Luke 6:17-26

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

In 2011 an EF-5 tornado tore through Joplin, Missouri. As many of you know, my family and I lived there at the time. While our home was not in the path of the tornado, many in the congregation were. Additionally, after staying on the ground for almost 10 miles, many of those miles right through highly populated parts of town, thousands of homes and other structures were gone and 161 people were dead.

And people wanted to help.

Not only did neighbors help neighbors even as they dug out of their own rubble...not only did people from parts of town untouched by the tornado's winds venture out to help those who had been directly impacted...but people from all over came as soon as they could bringing chainsaws and work gloves and food and clothing.

And we were reminded of the importance of helping one another.

But, as a pastor, there were a few phone calls I received that just made me want to scream.

One of them came from someone I had a relationship with and had regard for. "I have a crew of ten people with chainsaws ready to come to Joplin tomorrow. Just tell me where we need to go," he said. Helpers? Great. Chainsaws? Great. But he hadn't even asked if volunteers were being let into town yet or if chainsaws were the greatest need. And when I suggested that the people I was working with mostly needed folks to help them dig through the rubble of their homes and see if anything was salvageable, he wasn't interested in that job. He only wanted to use his chainsaw. And his call made me mad.

I remember pausing and having to ask myself why this was so frustrating to me. Maybe I was just tired. Well, yes, I was tired, but that wasn't it.

I realized that people like this friend of mine, well-meaning people, were a lot like me. They were people who were used to being the helpers. They were people who usually gave what was needed and solved the problems.

But the tornado reminded me that sometimes we don't need a knight on a white horse or a savior from on high coming to save the day. Sometimes we don't need a person who is sure they have all the answers or who can distance themselves from the struggles because of their own power or position. Sometimes we don't want the help of

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those who only want to do what they want to do and refuse to listen to what is really needed.

Rather what we need is someone to stand next to us, to listen to us, to look us in the eye, to put an arm around our shoulders, to be with us in the midst of the questions and the confusion even when it isn't comfortable.

Jesus was gathered with a great crowd of people - some who were already followers of his, some who were curious, some who needed healing. As he was healing and teaching, he looked to those who were his disciples and said, "Blessed are those who are poor, who are hungry, who are weeping, who are being left out because of their commitment to God's ways. And woe to those who are rich, who have full bellies, whose days are filled with laughter, who are spoken well of whether they should be or not."

I wonder how his disciples heard these words. I wonder if they looked around at the crowd and started dividing people into these two different groups. I wonder if they heard this and were sure that *they* were blessed.

See, often we hear lists like these and have this very binary reaction. You are either in this group or in that group. We tend to like to think that way - you are rich or you are poor, you are healthy or you are sick, you are a helper or you are in need of help.

And yet, something subtle happens in this story when we read it here in the Gospel of Luke. See, most of us really know the beatitudes from Matthew's gospel. In Matthew three things are different. The blessings are there, but not the woes. The language is more spiritual than physical - so we hear Matthew's Jesus talk about being poor in spirit not financially poor, or hungering for righteousness not just being hungry. And in Matthew the beatitudes come in the sermon on the mount, so we are more likely to hear Jesus as an authoritative figure making proclamations from on high.

But Luke's Jesus, he is not up on a mountain where everyone can look up to him and see him from their various perches. Rather he is on the plain - on level ground - right in the midst of the mess that we call life. He is on the level ground where those distinctions between people become more blurry, where the rich and poor meet and look each other in the eyes, where we sometimes can't tell who is hungry and who has just been fed.

So, why does this matter?

Maybe it matters because being on level ground - it's actually not an easy place to be.

We are better at being up there, being looked up to, being held in high regard. We are even better at being down and out, walking through the valleys of struggle and strain, knowing that we are suffering, or not feeling worthy.

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But what happens when we come together, when we enter into each other's experiences, when we have to work to figure out what's going on and what we should do?

Karoline Lewis, Preaching Professor at Luther Seminary, writes, "I suspect we don't like being on an equal level with others. A level plain assumes a rather blurred view. You have to stand on your tippy toes to see. Vision is not clear. Things and people are in your way. We know this experience. Imagine a concert. Trying to see over the heads of others, in between the bodies of others, so as to bring into view the reason you are there" (Karoline Lewis, WorkingPreacher.org, February 11, 2019, [A Level Plain Perspective - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)).

But what does it mean if Jesus calls us together on a level plain? What happens when our perspective changes, when we have to figure out together what it is we are looking at and where it is we are going? What happens when the distinctions of those up there or those down there are removed and we learn to see each other from a different view?

Maybe what happens is we see glimpses, even blurry glimpses, of God's kin-dom.

Friends, today we will be taking our Week of Compassion offering. Week of Compassion is the relief, refugee, and development mission fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). But it is so much more than that.

While we take an offering, Week of Compassion isn't just a way that those of us who have enough can give money to those who are struggling. Rather that money becomes a tangible sign of our solidarity, of our desire to stand beside those who are experiencing a challenging time. It is our recognition that given a change in circumstances, we could be the ones who are struggling.

After the Joplin tornado, and some of you have heard me share this before, Avis, a woman in her 90's whose house had blown apart around her, was one of the people to whom I delivered a solidarity check from Week of Compassion. As she took the check from my hands she said, "I have given to Week of Compassion for as long as I can remember. I never thought I would get anything back." But when Avis was the one who was hurting, Week of Compassion was there to stand beside her.

That is the work to which we are called...whether in partnership with Week of Compassion or simply in our daily lives. It is the work of people joining people in the midst of all of life's experiences. It is the work of learning to find the level ground where we can be not above or below, but together with each other, human to human, on this life's journey. Amen.