
Jeremiah 17:5-10

⁵Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. ⁶They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. ⁷Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. ⁸They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. ⁹The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? ¹⁰I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷He 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. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. ²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²²“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you^[a] on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. ²⁴“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵“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. ²⁶“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

**“Life in the Kingdom of God”
Rev. Leanne B. Thompson
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The words we use matter. How we use them matters. When we use them well, they help foster communication and understanding between people. Sometimes the way we use words can be a barrier to understanding. A good

example of this is slang. Back in the day when I was a camp counselor the slang that was used to indicate that something was really good, or interesting, or popular was to say that something was “the bomb.” We spent an entire summer with kids telling us “that game was the bomb” or “that worship skit was the bomb.” Once we understood the intent of that slang phrase it was pretty high praise to hear that the effort we put into planning and leading activities was explosively fabulous. I still use that expression on occasion – when I’m feeling nostalgic and I’m around other people of a generation to get the inside joke. I’ll tell you where I don’t use it: in the airport security lane. I’m pretty sure that pointing to another traveler’s really gorgeous carryon and saying “that bag is the bomb,” is a guaranteed way to get the wrong kind of attention.

That is true of some of the slang used in more recent years. The first time I heard a teenager say that someone or something was “lit” I started paying attention and wondering if I was going to have to do an intervention. You see, in my teenage and college years, to say that someone was “lit” meant they were intoxicated or high. I was relieved to discover that in the current vernacular, “lit” was an expression of general awesomeness, like “the bomb” for a new generation. I’m pretty sure that “lit” is no longer the choice term of the day, so don’t try to use it with your kids or grandkids to be cool. I promise you it will have the opposite effect. But words matter. And we can jump to all kinds of wrong conclusions if we don’t know what people mean by the words they use.

Our gospel lesson is no exception. Before we even get past the first sentence, we encounter our first potential stumbling block: “He came down with them and stood on a level place.” Luke has made an intentional word choice. In the gospel of Matthew, we hear the same story of Jesus teaching the people, but in his gospel he calls it the “sermon on the mound.” Matthew intentionally positions Jesus above the people and closer to God, emphasizing the authority of Jesus and his words. In Luke, we get the “sermon on the level place.” Our first instinct might be to understand this as a positive thing. Jesus has chosen to come down where the people are; Jesus has chosen to be in their midst; Jesus has chosen to be on their level. When we call something a “level playing field,” we mean that everyone has the same opportunities and resources available to them. We might interpret this to mean that everyone has the same opportunity and access to Jesus. And I think all of that is true. About Jesus. But when Luke writes that Jesus has come down to a “level place” he is saying

something about the world. You see, “level place” is a good, old-fashioned example of ancient near east slang. In Luke’s day, to say that something is “level,” according to biblical scholar Ronald J. Allen, “often refers to places of corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning.” Jesus went down to the “level” place. Think of the most miserable places you can think of in the world. Think of the places where the homeless freeze on bitter winter nights sheltered by cardboard. Think of the places where children are neglected and left to sit in their own feces while the adults who are supposed to care for them cook up meth. Think of third world ghettos without running water or sewer systems. Think of the worst of our world that you can imagine. Jesus went down to that “level” place. And while he was there he healed the sick, and fed the hungry and cast out demons. He lifted humanity out of the gutter and said let me show you another way.

This is the absolute power and wonder of Jesus that Luke is trying to communicate to his readers: Jesus came down to meet people where they were, right in the midst of their mess, and he began, one person at a time, to change the world. And then he looks over at his disciples to see if they are paying attention and says, and I’m paraphrasing here, he says to them: “Do you see what I’m doing? I’m bringing the kingdom of heaven to them right here, and right now, right where they are in this level place.”

This was a critical message for the early followers of Jesus to hear. Let me explain why. This gospel was written down somewhere around 70 to 100 CE, roughly 50 to 90 years after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension. The people that would have first read these words knew that Jesus was the Messiah, they knew he was the Son of God come to earth to usher in a new kingdom under the reign of Christ. They knew that Jesus had promised that he would return in the end times to set everything right. And they were waiting for Jesus to return like it was going to happen any day, certainly in their lifetime. They had deep faith that Jesus was going to rescue them from their broken and sinful world. But there was a sort of fatalism about their faith. I’m a follower of Jesus; I know that I have been saved by him; any day now he is going to come back and get me; so I’m just going to sit here and wait for that to happen; I am going to sit here and let this “level” place get more “level” around me, and it’s not my responsibility if it does. I’m just going to sit here and do nothing and wait. Because I’m saved. And Jesus is going to come back to welcome me into the kingdom and send everyone else to hell.

But that is not what Jesus taught. What Jesus modeled in his life and in his teaching – in this gospel story – was this wonderful mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven filtering into the “level” world and beginning to shine light in the darkness. This amazing thing happened when Jesus went to the “level” places. Those places became sacred, holy ground where miracles happened. It didn’t change the whole world all at once. But Jesus showed us that if we let the light into those places, they became miniature examples, small glimmers of the reign of Christ to come. Jesus was teaching his followers to understand that the Reign of Christ was not only coming but was already here in the places where his followers chose to live according to kingdom ethics instead of the “level” ways of the world.

And just in case they didn’t understand what this new kingdom ethic looked like he began to paint the pictured:

- 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 in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.

And here is where we encounter our next stumbling block in understanding. Our contemporary culture has interpreted “blessed” to mean an absence of struggle and the presence of creature comforts. We are “blessed” when we have a roof over our heads and plenty to eat. We are “blessed” when we aren’t the one with a cancer diagnosis, or when we aren’t the one who has just lost a loved one, or just lost a job. We are blessed when everything is going well in our lives. If you use the word “blessed” in this way (and who among us hasn’t at one time or another) allow me to quote Inigo Montoya from the 1987 film, *The Princess Bride*: “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

According to Allen, “the word *blessed* here refers to being aware in the present of having a place in the movement towards the Realm [of God].” In other words, to be “blessed” is to be part of the revolution of love, justice, kindness, and peace. To be “blessed” is to be part of the resistance against the “level” ways of the world. To be “blessed” is to recognize, in the moment, that you are choosing to speak, and act, and serve, and love, consistent with the ways of God’s realm instead of the ways of the world. You are choosing to be in this

world as one who believes it is coming and already here if we give it space to grow in our midst. Listen to the list again, paraphrased according to our new understand of the world “blessed:”

- You are “blessed” if you are willing to share what you have so that everyone has some; greed is the way of a “level world.” To be generous is to live into God’s kingdom.
- You are “blessed” if you know what it means to be hungry. Sharing your feast so that others are fed will fill you in ways gluttony never can.
- You are blessed if you know what it means to weep, for you will have empathy for those who mourn, and together you will discover reasons for joy.
- You are “blessed” when you are hated, reviled, and excluded because of me. The cost of being included in the “level” values of the world like pride, power, and popularity, is to miss out on the wonders that come from living the kingdom values of peace, kindness, and mercy.

What an incredible gift Jesus gave us when he came down to the “level” places – the gutters of our world – and taught us to be “blessed” – awake to the possibility that we can part of something that is changing the world.

Look around you. The “level” places are all around us. There is more brokenness than we can name in this world. But we are not alone. Jesus came where we are and left his Spirit to guide and encourage us, to teach and lead us, in a new way of life, a life of humility, generosity, mercy, kindness, and love. The “level” places aren’t going away any time soon. And if history is any indication, we could be waiting a very long time for Jesus to return and set all things right. But we are not lost, we are “blessed,” because we see are not overcome by the brokenness of the world; we are “blessed” because we get to participate in the healing of the world by following the way of Jesus here and now, embracing and living kingdom values while we wait for the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. We can use our lives to make a difference in the world in Jesus name right now, right where we are in the “level” places. And that, friends, is “the bomb.” Or its “lit.” Whatever word you use to describe it, its and amazing gift.

Alleluia! Amen.