

“A Level Place”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning Luke 6:17-26  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco  
on February 17, 2019

These verses are Luke’s version of the beatitudes. More commonly referenced are the beatitudes found in Matthew 5 as part of Jesus’ well-known Sermon on the Mount. Luke’s version is a little different from Matthew’s.

First of all, Matthew’s version focuses exclusively on blessing—blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are, blessed are, blessed are. Luke’s version also includes the woe-to-you’s: Woe to the rich, woe to the full, woe to the laughing and well-liked. (More on woes later.)

Secondly, Luke’s version is referred to as the Sermon on the Plain rather than the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew, Jesus stands on a mountain. You can imagine him climbing upwards so that the masses can see and hear him more clearly. But in Luke, Jesus starts on a mountain in v. 12 to spend the night in prayer and call his disciples, but after that, Luke clearly writes, “He came down with them and stood on a level place.”

Generally speaking, biblical writers are not verbose when it comes to details. With perhaps the singular exception of the tabernacle-building instructions in Exodus, biblical writers are sparse on detail. You hear very little about scenery or setting, about the character’s inner thoughts and feelings. The writers report only what they deem necessary for communicating the story, and so when you come across a seemingly mundane detail, such as, “he stood on a level place,” chances are the detail is significant.

In Luke’s account of the beatitudes, before Jesus ever opens his mouth to speak, he first mingles with the people, healing them and curing them of troubling spirits. Luke says everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them. That is, it was a very physical and up-close experience. Jesus did not stand above them, delivering a message from on high. He communicated with his body that he was with them. He stood among them, right beside them, literally touching their woundedness and pain, and what he had to say to them arose from this experience being with them on level ground.

I love the way the artist captures this scene in the image on the front of your worship guide. The piece is labeled, “Sermon on the Mount,” but I think it is actually depicting the Sermon on the Plain from the Gospel of Luke. All around Jesus are hurting people. Looking at this particular image, it takes a second to find Jesus in the crowd. Some of the lame and injured aren’t even facing him. They look to be still focused on their suffering. Who knows if they are even hearing his words or just waiting for him to reach them and touch them? In a way, it doesn’t matter if they hear the words. They are about to experience the truth of his message in their bodies.

Imagine if our own life message to the world was so palpable it didn't matter if people listened when we talked or not, because what we had to say was so evident in how we lived, the message came through regardless.

I think sometimes in our attempt to do good for humanity, we speak from the mountaintop rather than the plain, when maybe the plain is where Jesus is calling us to stand. We might believe ourselves to have an elevated point of view up there on the mountain and so we share our opinions out of a self-righteous sense of superiority. But the wisdom of Jesus arises not from some detached vantage point up near the clouds as a scholar or reader of books and essays; rather Jesus' wisdom bubbles up from his experience among the people.

He did spend the night before his sermon in prayer on the mountain, which is important, but he coupled private prayer with the prayer of solidarity and with-ness (or witness), the kind of prayer that has hands and feet to it. He could not gain knowledge on a mountaintop alone. He had to come down from the mountain and look people in the eye and encounter their suffering face to face. You might say this foreshadows the Transfiguration, where Jesus will come down from the shiny mountaintop experience into the dark valley known as the cross.

It is from the vantage point of the plain that the Lukan Jesus can offer up not only words of blessing, but also words of woe. Perhaps among the impoverished, the dangers of wealth are all the more apparent. Among the nameless and unknown, fame and fortune are revealed for their emptiness. It is a perspective you cannot see standing on top of people. It's something you can only know when walking beside them.

Jesus has such words of hope for those who are poor, those who are hungry, those who are mourning, those who are excluded, reviled, or defamed. And we know by his actions that these words are not empty. He literally attends to the poor and feeds the hungry and heals the broken-hearted and includes the excluded.

His words for those who appear to be doing well in life, however, are startlingly harsh. Is he really being fair? Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation? Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep? What is the meaning of this upside-down way of thinking? Are you and I in trouble for laughter? Perhaps a better question is: at what or at whom do we laugh? To so many people, Jesus' words must have sounded like nonsense. Blessed are the poor, doomed are the rich. What does that even mean, really?

Well, I'm not entirely sure what it means, but I have some hunches. One way of understanding Jesus' words that came to mind is this little book I own—it is a picture book for grown-ups called, *Hope for the Flowers*.<sup>1</sup> I'd like to read the beginning of it to you:

*Once upon a time a tiny striped caterpillar burst from the egg which had been home for so long. "Hello world," he said. "It sure is bright out here in the sun."*

*"I'm hungry," he thought and straightway began to eat the leaf he was born on. And he ate another leaf . . . and another . . . and another . . . and got bigger and bigger and bigger until one day he stopped eating and thought, "There must be more to life than just eating and getting*

*bigger. It's getting dull." So Stripe crawled down from the friendly tree which had shaded and fed him. He was seeking more. There were all sorts of new things to find. Grass and dirt and holes and tiny bugs—each fascinated him. But nothing satisfied him.*

*When he came across some other crawlers like himself he was especially excited. But they were so busy eating they had no time to talk—just as Stripe had been. "They don't know any more about life than I do," he sighed. Then one day Stripe saw some crawlers really crawling. He looked around for their goal and saw a great column rising high into the air. When he joined he discovered . . . the column was a pile of squirming, pushing, caterpillars—a caterpillar pillar. It appeared that the caterpillars were trying to reach the top—but the top was so lost in the clouds that Stripe had no idea what was there. He felt new excitement. "Maybe I'll find what I'm looking for."*

*Full of agitation Stripe asked a fellow crawler: "Do you know what is happening?"*

*"I just arrived myself," said the other. "Nobody has time to explain; they're so busy trying to get wherever they're going up there."*

*"But what's at the top?" continued Stripe.*

*"No one knows that either but it must be awfully good because everybody's rushing there. Goodbye; I've no more time!" He plunged into the pile.*

*"There's only one thing to do," thought Stripe. He pushed himself in. The first moments on the pile were a shock. Stripe was pushed and kicked and stepped on from every direction. It was climb or be climbed . . . Stripe climbed. No more fellow caterpillars on Stripe's pile—they became only threats and obstacles which he turned into steps and opportunities. This single-minded approach really helped and Stripe felt he was getting much higher. But some days it seemed he could manage only to keep his place. It was especially then that an anxious shadow nagged inside. "What's at the top?" it whispered. Where are we going?"*

*On one exasperated day Stripe couldn't stand it any longer and actually yelled back: "I don't know, but there's no time to think about it!" A little yellow caterpillar he was crawling over gasped: "What did you say?"*

*"I was just talking to myself," Stripe mumbled. "It really isn't important—I was just wondering where we're going?"*

*"You know," Yellow said, "I was wondering that myself, but since there's no way to find out I decided it wasn't important." She blushed at how silly this sounded—quickly adding, "No one else seems to worry about where we're going so it must good." But she blushed again. "How far are we from the top?"*

*Stripe answered gravely, "Since we're not at the bottom and not at the top, we must be in the middle."*

*“Oh,” said Yellow, and they both began climbing again. But Stripe had a new feeling. He felt bad. He had lost his singlemindedness. “How can I step on someone I’ve just talked to?” Stripe avoided Yellow as much as possible, but one day there she was, blocking the only way up. “Well, I guess it’s you or me,” he said, and stepped squarely on her head. Something in the way Yellow looked at him made him feel just awful about himself—Like: no matter what is up there—it just isn’t worth it. Stripe crawled off Yellow and whispered, “I’m sorry.”*

*And Yellow began to cry: “I could stand this life hoping in what was ahead until I met you talking to yourself that day. Since then my heart just hasn’t been in it—but I don’t know what to do. I didn’t know how badly I felt about this life until then. Now when you look at me so kindly, I know for sure I don’t like this life. I just want to do something like crawl with you and nibble grass.”*

*Stripe’s heart leapt inside. Everything looked different. The pillar made no sense at all. “I would like that too,” he whispered. But this meant giving up the climb—a hard decision. “Yellow dear, maybe we’re close to the top. Maybe if we help each other we can get there quickly.”*

*“Maybe,” she said. But they both knew this wasn’t what they wanted most. “Let’s go down,” Yellow said.*

*“Okay.” And they stopped climbing. They clung to each other as masses of caterpillars crawled over them. The air was terrible but they were happy with each other and made a big ball so nobody could step in their eyes and stomachs. They did nothing at all for what seemed a long time. Suddenly they didn’t feel anything crawling over them. They unrolled and opened their eyes. They were at the side of the caterpillar pillar . . .*

This isn’t the end of the story. There is quite a bit more to go, which you will have to read for yourself something. I don’t want to give anything away, but if you know anything about caterpillars, you might be able to make an educated guess about the ending.

At one point in the story, Stripe and Yellow separate, which, of course, is heart-wrenching. Stripe returns to the caterpillar pillar only to discover after a very hard climb that at the top of the pillar, there is nothing at all. He would be distraught, only right about then, something flies up to him—a yellow butterfly. He begins to crawl back down the caterpillar pillar, and as he goes he tries his best to warn the other caterpillars that there is nothing up there. But no one believes him, because, why would everyone be trying so hard if there wasn’t anything worth climbing for? He tries to tell them, “You have a butterfly inside you, if only they would stop climbing!” but clearly, not-climbing is for losers, and so no one believes him.

This is what is meant, I think, by Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain. Woe to you who have climbed and shoved your way to the top, for you will find yourselves empty and alone. Blessed are you who roll to the bottom and face what feels like death, for you shall soon fly.

Am I making any sense? Does it all seem too absurd to be true? (Did I really just read you a book about caterpillars?) Yes. You guys, it makes perfect sense, unless you’re still shoving and climbing and pushing your way to the top—whatever “the top” means to you. Then Jesus’ words

are nonsense and even offensive. But if you stand on a level place and listen, you will hear the blessing, the invitation, the promise . . . that you can fly.

Blessed are you who pause from the mad dash to listen. Blessed are you who feel pain—your own and the pain of others. Blessed are you who are stepped on, squashed and ignored. Blessed are you who make friends, not stepping stones. Blessed are you who fall down, and blessed are you who fail, for there is more to life than success.

Woe to you who single-mindedly climb, climb, climb. Woe to you who are unaware that you stand on the backs of slave labor and fill your houses with the products of sweat shops. Woe to you who use people for your gain. Woe to you who laugh at prejudiced jokes or who smile along even though you don't think it is funny. Woe to you who value popularity over integrity, who network more often than you love your neighbor.

Blessed are you who stand on the plain, who learn from the outcasts rather than lecture them. Blessed are you when you suffer for doing good, for Christ himself walks beside you.

I don't know about you, but when I hear these words, it turns out I am in two categories—I am blessed and I am woe-d. I made that word up, but the point is, I don't fall neatly into either group. So, as someone who stands in two places—one that is privileged and one that is pained—I give you permission to listen to Jesus and hear what it is you most need to hear today. Maybe it is the word of blessing that your soul needs today. Maybe it is the word of challenge. I wouldn't know; I'm not in your shoes. All I know is that both messages are there, and that the Spirit has something to say to you, and if you are open, you will hear it. This I know: Blessed are those who listen. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Trina Paulus, *Hope for the Flowers*, (Paulist Press 1973).