

## February 20, 2022 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Luke 6:17–31](#)

### TITLE: **Straight Talk on Level Ground**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Matthew, Mark, and Luke each describe a sermon Jesus preached to a large crowd of followers. Matthew has Jesus preach from a mountain top; hence, the Sermon on the Mount. Mark has Jesus preach from the seashore. But Luke makes a big deal out of Jesus preaching on a plain, a level place where he was at eye-level with all his listeners. No pontification from on high; here was straight talk on level ground. And for Jesus' audience, there were no balcony seats or luxury boxes to be monopolized by the rich and powerful. Everything was general admission—a tumble of humanity, rich and poor, young and old, the curious and the questioning, all gathered together to hear the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

The people standing before Jesus were a mixed bunch and likely they all wanted something different from him. If they or someone they loved was ill, they wanted Jesus to be a miracle-worker. If they were anxious, depressed or grieving, they wanted Jesus to bring a word of comfort and hope. In uncertain times (then and now), we want both a word from Christ just for us as well as a word that can calm the storms of life raging around us.

Which is why Jesus' location that day was so important. He came to them on a plain, at their level, literally right there in their midst. He was direct, eye-to-eye, offering words of faith to one and to all. There's an important lesson in this for us: If you want to care for others as Christ cares, then notice carefully the location in which you find yourself. Are you trying to work from on high, seeing others as below your station; or perhaps from a distance, keeping people at arm's length? Or are you right there in their midst, eye-to-eye, heart-to-heart? What is true for real estate is also true for living faithfully: location, location, location.

In the sermon on the plain in Luke's gospel, Jesus surveyed the crowd before him and then offered them four beatitudes and four woes. Matthew's version of this sermon is much more popular because it contains eight beatitudes and no woes. But there is wisdom in Luke's honest pairing of good news/bad news. Any honest faith talk cannot be all saccharine or all vinegar; it can't be just pie-in-the-sky or fire-and-brimstone. As the great country music theologian Mary Chapin Carpenter put it years ago, "Sometimes you're the windshield, and sometimes you're the bug."

Jesus doesn't mince words with the crowd gathered around him. He names four blessings and four woes that likely touched every one of them—sometimes with a dose from each category. "Are you poor? Blessed are you for yours is the Kingdom of God... Are you rich? Woe to you for you treat your riches as if you already have God's kingdom." "Are you hungry? Hold on, you will be filled—even satisfied with something

worth more than food. Are you full now? Woe to you, for you have no appetite for what is of eternal value.” Sometimes we wish Jesus would just put us in one group or the other: “You on the left: Are you weeping now? Don’t fear, for in time you will laugh again. But you, on the right, are you laughing? Woe to you; you’ll be crying soon enough.” Yet Jesus said all these things to one single group of people. It was not an “us vs. them” sermon. It was a both/and type of sermon. He told them not to be filled with despair but neither be filled with false pride. That may not be the message they wanted to hear, but it was the plain, honest truth for them and all of us.

There’s a story about an Amish farmer who was confronted by an overly enthusiastic young evangelist. The man asked, “Brother, have you been saved? Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?” To which the Amish gentleman replied, “Why do you ask me such a thing? I could tell you anything. Here is the name of my banker, my neighbor, my grocer, and my farm hands. Ask them if I am saved.” We are seldom the best person to answer the question about whether we are faithful or unfaithful. There are times blessings fall softly on our ears and are just what we need to hear; just as there are times criticism hits us in the chest and reminds us what we need to change. That was why Jesus started his sermon on the plain the way he did with blessings and woes.

If I polled this congregation right now to say one word about how you’re feeling, I can imagine some of the words I might hear: tired, stressed, uncertain about tomorrow, maybe hopeful that things will improve soon, mostly hanging on. I get that. That’s why I also imagine that Jesus’ tone softened before he went on with his message. What he said next was something comforting and invitational—v. 27 “*But I say to you that listen.*” To you that listen. To you that have quieted your own inner voice long enough to let the still, small voice of God echo inside you for a moment, Jesus then names nine examples of love in action—surprising examples, plain truth examples. *Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse, pray for the abuser; if struck, turn the other cheek; if your coat is requested, offer your shirt too. Give to all who beg; don’t ask back for what has been taken. Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

These sayings all seem to be the opposite of what was expected: loving enemies, praying for abusers, turning the other cheek. It sounds like an inversion of morals; a definition of love that’s been turned on its head. I recently read about something called a “Dutch auction.” At a regular auction, a starting price is named and then you bid against others, gradually raising the price until one person wins the item. But in a Dutch auction, the exact reverse happens. A high price is named and then the auctioneer starts lowering the price until one person says he or she will pay that amount and they win that item. If you jump early, you maybe paid too much. But if you wait too long, you’ll lose out.

Jesus turned the idea of love onto its head. Love is not just for those who already love you, but for those different from you, indifferent to you, even antagonistic to you. Which is precisely why I think Jesus' tone softened when he got to this part of his sermon. You cannot shout at someone, "Hey, love your enemy." This is not behavior that can be coerced. Goodness knows, it is not even behavior that we'll be successful in doing 75% of the time. It is contrary to much of what we've been taught in the hard knock school of life. That is why I believe Jesus said these words gently, compassionately, and why he ended with the greatest truth of all. *Do unto others as you would have them do to you.* That final commandment requires us to first ask, "What do I want most of all? What is the yearning of my spirit? Who am I behind my mask? Am I filled with things, but feel empty of substance? Am I distracted and entertained, but feel my life lacks purpose? Am I literally poor or hungry or alone or unjustly pushed to the margins? Who am I?"

The comfort Jesus offers is that he sees us just as we are. He knows our hearts, our pain, our distractedness and unease. He knows the one-word answers we would give this very day about how we're doing. That is why, speaking on level ground, eye-to-eye, he would direct our gaze to those around us and says, "Look, you are not alone. Others around you are feeling the same things—good and bad, blessings and woes. As you can really see that and respond to that, you allow the healing you seek to come to you as well. As you do unto others, it will be done to you as well."

Jesus spoke plainly that day on level ground. He held up the antitheses of life, the good and bad around us and within us. Then he offered words of comfort as well as challenge. We are to live a life shaped by risk-taking, counter-cultural love. We are to live so that our neighbors, banker, and employees know whether or not we are saved. We are to care enough about ourselves and how we are treated that it becomes the primary guide for how we treat others. We are to always, always look behind the masks. When we do that, we step into a place where grace abounds, forgiveness takes root, joy far deeper than happiness nestles inside us, and love—love in Christ, through Christ, with Christ—love wins.

AMEN