

February 13, 2022
Luke 6:17-26

Epiphany 6
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Level Playing Field”

“He 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.”

This year’s Super Bowl includes something that has only occurred once in the history of this game: it is being played on the home field of one of the teams, the Los Angeles Rams. Super Bowl cities are usually selected years in advance, with no knowledge as to which teams play for the NFL championship. The fact that this game is being played on the home field of the Rams may appear to give them an unfair advantage over the Bengals, but all efforts are being made so that both teams will have confidence that they will contest for the championship on a “level playing field,” where both teams will play by the same set of rules in *“a state in which conditions in a competition or situation are fair for everyone.”* (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Concepts of fairness, of competing on a “level playing field,” go far beyond the Super Bowl or other sports events. They stretch into many aspects of life, seeking to ensure that all people have equal access and equal opportunity. If it appears that the field is “uneven,” that some people or groups have an unfair advantage, the result is often an outcry at the injustice of the situation, how one party is gaining at the expense of the other. For entrepreneur Iqbal Quadir, creating a level playing field is a central part of his work: *“I’m motivated by creating a level playing field so that the weak have a chance.”*

Today’s Gospel lesson may sound very familiar, since it is similar to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. It is at the beginning of a section that features Jesus’ teachings on the nature and demands of discipleship. Jesus has previously been up on a mountain where *“he spent the night in prayer to God”* (6:12), and where *“he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles”* (6:13). Unlike in Matthew’s account where Jesus *“went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him”* (Matthew 5:1), in Luke’s Gospel Jesus comes down the mountain and teaches from a level place: *“he 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.”* (6:17). These verses put all who have come out to hear Jesus on a “level playing field”; this is a gathering of those who have been responsive to Jesus’ work and his call to discipleship. The

mention of Tyre and Sidon indicates that the crowd included both Gentiles and Jews, indicating that *“Jesus’ teachings are for his disciples and for all who would be disciples; nothing is exclusive or secretive”* (Fred Craddock). This crowd has not come to test Jesus or gathered out of idle curiosity; *“they had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.”* (6:18). They came to experience the teachings and power that were present in Jesus, *“for power came out from him and healed all of them”* (6:19). This power was *“not just any power, but the power of God. And that power was all about healing and restoring those who had come for help.”* (Sarah Henrich).

It is among this crowd of disciples and would-be disciples who have gathered on this “level playing field” that Jesus begins his teaching, setting the standard for which every disciple should strive. The Beatitudes in Luke are reminiscent of the teaching of Moses in Deuteronomy that include promises of blessings and warnings about curses:

- “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God and I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known.” – Deuteronomy 11:26-28.

The Beatitudes in Luke are similar to the blessings that begin the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (Matthew 5:3-12) in that they announce God’s favour on the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated. They describe a world that reverses almost everything that Jesus’ audience had experienced; they echo the words of Mary in her famous song, the *Magnificat*, in which the mother of Jesus looks toward the reign of God in which the Lord *“has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”* (Luke 1:52-53). But the Beatitudes in Luke differ from the more familiar list of blessings in Matthew in a few key ways: while Jesus speaks in more general terms in Matthew (*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* – 5:3), in Luke Jesus addresses the crowd directly (*“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”* – 6:20). In Luke’s Beatitudes, Jesus speaks of real socioeconomic conditions rather than spiritual conditions and attitudes; Jesus declares his blessing upon *“you who are hungry now”* (6:21), not on *“those who hunger and thirst for righteousness”* (5:6). In declaring God’s partisan commitment to the poor and the oppressed, these blessings neither idealize nor glorify poverty; rather, they declare God’s prejudicial commitment to the poor. The coming

of the kingdom of God will bring a reversal of fortunes; the hungry will be fed, and those who weep will laugh. The fulfillment of Scripture that Jesus announced in Nazareth is proclaimed anew, the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah that *“the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”* (4:18-19, Isaiah 61:1-2). God’s promise that the hungry will be fed echoes the Old Testament expectations of a coming banquet for God’s people (*“For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.”* – Psalm 107:9); laughter and joy among the oppressed will characterize the kingdom of God (*“Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, ‘The LORD has done great things for them.’ The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.”* – Psalm 126:2-3). In announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God, Jesus proclaims that *“henceforth God’s presence, advocacy, and redemptive work will be seen among the poor.”* (Alan Culpepper). Jesus also announces blessings on those who have been despised, *“when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man”* (6:22). This relates to the early church’s experience of being persecuted; it offer encouragement to those who suffer for the sake of their commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and promise reward to those who are faithful to the Lord even when they are cast out and reviled (*“Your own people who hate you and reject you for my name’s sake have said, ‘Let the LORD be glorified, so that we may see your joy’; but it is they who shall be put to shame.”* – Isaiah 66:5). Jesus’ words *“are promises to those who are suffering in this world that God still sees them, loves them, and is intent on their thriving.”* (Henrich).

Luke’s Beatitudes all differ from Matthew’s in that they also include a list of woes which announce God’s judgment on those who do not live according to God’s Word and focus on their own needs rather than on the needs of others. More than any other Gospel, Luke expounds on the dangers of wealth, from Mary’s warning that God has *“sent the rich away empty”* (1:53) to Jesus’ own warning to *“be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist of an abundance of possessions”* (12:15). Because the Kingdom of God means God’s vindication of the poor, it is nearly impossible for the rich to enter the Kingdom (*“Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”* – 18:25). As the rich man who ignored the suffering of the poor man at his gates would discover, the day would come when the Lord declares that *“between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us”* (16:26).

As those who suffered will receive a reversal in which they will be blessed, those who have sought blessings through their riches and status will experience a reversal in which they will be hungry, mourn and weep, and end up with the same fate that befell the false prophets. Nevertheless, there is hope for those upon whom woes are pronounced if they, like Zacchaeus, repent and receive Jesus' promise that *"today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."* (19:9-10). The beatitudes and woes that Jesus proclaims to all who have come to hear his teaching on this "level playing field" *"announce that the end is not yet; when God establishes a just reign there will be a radical reversal of the fortunes of the rich and the poor."* (Alan Culpepper). Luke places this sermon of Jesus *"on a level place"* so that all people might have access to his teaching and experience an invitation to become his disciples. The church that Jesus establishes was never meant to be an exclusive or restrictive club; it is the *"assembly of **all** believers among whom the Gospel is purely preached, and the sacraments are administered according to the Gospel"* (Augsburg Confession). The good news of our Christian faith is that *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that **everyone** who believes in him shall not perish but shall receive eternal life"* (John 3:16). The Holy Spirit empowers the apostles on the day of Pentecost so that they might proclaim the good news in the languages of all people, so that *"in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power"* (Acts 2:11). Saul of Tarsus is blinded on the road to Damascus so that he might fulfill Jesus' call to be *"an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel"* (Acts 9:15); when Peter is invited into the home of a Gentile, he declares that *"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him"* (Acts 10:34-35).

- "The gospel was written for Christians living a generation or two after the first groups of believers had gathered. In this teaching of Jesus, as so often in his gospel, Luke reminds his hearers that they are all called to continue to live lives 'rich toward God' (Luke 12:21) no matter how long it seems to be taking for God's reign to be fully present. That is an important word also for us." – Henrich.

The Church of Jesus Christ has always been called to create a "level playing field" so that all people have access to God's Word and can hear our Lord's invitation to discipleship. In calling people to see that *"now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!"* Paul assures his readers in his second letter to the Corinthians that *"we are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our*

ministry ... In return – I speak as to children – open wide your hearts also” (2 Corinthians 6:2-3, 13). Martin Luther’s work in bringing the Word of God to all people so that all might know that we “are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24) led him to translate the Bible from Latin, which only a few people could read, into the German language of the common people so that all might hear God’s Word in language they could understand and come to know that they were also beloved children of God. We continue to strive as the Church of Jesus Christ to make God’s Word available to all people even during the restrictions of this current time, so that there might remain a “level playing field” for all who seek to hear God’s Word and become his disciples, knowing that the teachings of Jesus “are not suggestions about how to be happy or warnings lest one become miserable; blessings and woes as words of Jesus are to be heard with the assurance that they are God’s Word for us and that God’s Word is not empty.” (Craddock).

- “Hence the aim of this beatitude is to bring *all* who hear it to decision and salvation. All are called to be what in the reality of God they are already. The disciples are called blessed because they have obeyed the call of Jesus, and the people as a whole because they are heirs of the promise. But will they now claim their heritage by believing in Jesus Christ as his word? Or will they fall into apostasy by refusing to accept him? That is the question that remains to be answered.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

It remains to be seen who will win this year’s Super Bowl; but all efforts will be made to create a “level playing field” for both teams, even though the game is being played on the home field of the Los Angeles Rams. If there is even the slightest hint of favouritism, if one team appears to have an unfair advantage over the other, there will be an immediate and intense outcry against the unfairness of such a situation. Whoever wins the game, it needs to be known that both teams had a “level playing field” on which they could either win or lose. As the Church of Jesus Christ called to proclaim the Gospel in our generation, we need to continue Jesus’ ministry on the “level place” in which he taught all who would be his disciples what it meant to follow him. Not everyone would accept this call; one man who Jesus invited to “*go, sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me*” did not accept this invitation; instead, “*when the young man heard this, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions*” (Matthew 19:21-22). At the conclusion of hearing his teachings in the Fourth Gospel, many of his disciples declared that “*this teaching is difficult; who can accept it?*” (John 6:60), and “*because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer*

went about with him” (6:66). But those who remained had decided, along with Simon Peter, that “*you have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God*” (6:68-69). The call to discipleship is a call that is to be shared with all persons on a “level playing field,” so that they might decide whether or not they choose to follow Jesus. It is not an easy path; he warns his first disciples “*you will be hated by all because of my name,*” but Jesus also assures those who follow him that “*not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.*” (Luke 21:17-19). We can rejoice and be glad because the playing field was once leveled for us so that we heard our Lord’s invitation to follow him, and we know that no matter what challenges or difficulties we may face that God will work through us to accomplish God’s Will and to bring us God’s hope and assurance so that “*your souls magnify the Lord, and your spirits rejoice in God your Saviour. For he has looked with favour on you, and all generations will call you blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for you, and holy is his name.*” (Barbara Brown Taylor).

Amen.