

“On the Level”

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

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Ohio Conference, United Church of Christ

February 17, 2019

From the Pulpit

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I want to begin this morning by saying what a delight it is to be with you dear friends and to say thanks to your pastor and my dear cousin, Tim, for the kind invitation to be with you today to share the good news known by another name we call Gospel.

As the Transitional Conference Minister, it is my great honor and privilege to bring you greetings from the 338 other congregations which make up the Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ, which you may know includes two congregations in West Virginia and seven in Northern Kentucky just across the river from Cincinnati.

I also bring you greetings from our General Minister and President Rev. John Dorhauer and Associate General Ministers Rev. Traci Blackmon in Justice, Witness, and local church ministries, and Rev. Jim Moos, Associate General Minister of Global Ministries. I also bring you greetings on behalf of our global ministry with over 300 partners in 80 countries around the world who share in our response to the commission of Jesus Christ to meet people at the place of deepest need.

Even more I bring you greetings from Zion UCC in Delaware and my pastor, Rev. Beth Gedert and from St. Paul's UCC in Rockford, Ohio where I was last Sunday. It

just so happens that Tim's cousin Diane is a member there. This congregation out on the edge, near Indiana, sends its greetings. In fact I bring you a card of blessing from them.

If you haven't quite caught on, you and I are in a web of blessing and mutual encouragement and support that daily changes the lives of people near and far.

Your gifts to Our Churches Wider Mission make these life-giving connections possible – right here in central Ohio and around the world. And they provide daily on-the-ground water and food to folks in our country hit by fire and flood and around the world where war daily constitutes a struggle between life and death.

My own son, Andrew, was involved in this kind of work for a time as a Global Mission Intern serving in Beirut, Lebanon, where our shared ministry gets food and water relief to isolated communities in Syria. This is daily, ongoing, work.

I know that you are a five for five congregation. If you don't know what that means it means that as a congregation in addition to OCWM you have given to disaster relief through One Great Hour of Sharing. Long after the tv cameras are gone and the headlines have faded, our work of restoration

of communities continues through support from that offering.

Strengthen the church offering works at helping new churches get established and older churches renew. Neighbors in need offering helps support our Native American Congregations and helps advocate for a world in which all may flourish. The Christmas Fund supports retired pastors and their spouses who have served faithfully in smaller congregations and struggle in retirement to make ends meet.

So I say, thank you from the bottom of my heart, dear friends for your faithfulness to this mission of love which we share together near and far and for the many other ways you have provided and are providing leadership in many forms near and far in our life together. Thank-you! Thank-you! Thank-you!

Now that was my prologue, but don't worry we will get out on time.

I mentioned earlier that I am the Transitional Conference Minister for the Ohio Conference of which we are all a part. For 30 years prior to that I was a local church pastor, most recently for 22 years at David's UCC in Canal Winchester.

What that means throughout the conference is we are in a season of revisioning how we may be best mutually inspire, encourage and equip one another as agents of transformation.

The truth is that we are all transitional conference ministers. Because to live the Christian life is to be in a season of transformation from one thing that we know to a deeper reality to which God invites so that our joy and the joy of the world which God desires may be more and more full.

So along comes Jesus as Luke tells the story. In the first five chapters he has been born, baptized, sent into the wilderness, read scripture in his hometown on the Sabbath, declared that a new order of things has begun, ticked off the people who had seen him grow from knee-high to a grasshopper, he heals a lot, preaches some more, calls unlikely disciples whose professions varied from fishing to tax collecting.

Gets grilled about not fasting enough – eating and drinking too much with his disciples. And then if that isn't enough, he dares to heal on the sabbath because restoring wholeness is what Sabbath is about.

Then Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray through the night, names his disciples, and then he comes down...to a level place...among the people...who yearn for a word that

can strengthen their hearts and a touch that can heal their bodies...and a spirit that can transform their lives.

Scholars call Luke's retelling of Jesus' sermon, the sermon on the plain...contrasted with Matthew's version called the sermon on the mount.

Just to remind us all...the early hearers of Matthew's Gospel which is structured in five sections like the five Books of Moses, would have heard the word, "mountain" and remembered that mountains are often the location of theophany.

Literally a hearing of God. A mountaintop experience. So for Matthew, Jesus teaching is up on the mountain. But Luke, who seems to have a special interest in also reaching out to the Gentiles, frames things differently. The hearing is not meant for a select group. It is meant for whomever hungers.

If you have hungered, this word is for you. But truthfully it is meant for all of us.

Like so many things with Jesus, this word comforts and confronts in the same breath. You may have noticed this. Whereas Matthews beatitudes are filled with blessings alone, Luke's account of Jesus's teaching is more in line with the prophets of old.

Blessing and woe are set alongside each other. And in so doing Jesus turns the world upside down. Luke has a penchant for telling the good news slant in this way. And in so doing reminds us that Jesus takes the margins and makes them the center. In other words the center moves out to the margins. This is good news for some and challenging news for others, me included. Jesus comes down from the mountain to the plain to level things out by turning them upside down.

Many years ago now, when my wife, Beth, and I were starting out as co-pastors in Louisville, Kentucky, I was invited by one of our colleagues Maurice LeFevre, to be a counselor for one of the Senior High Camps. I had not done much church camping but Maurice assured me that it would be okay...that I should just follow his lead.

That seemed like it would all work out pretty well...that was until our first day, when Maurice proceeded to tell us that we were all going to learn how to do a head stand. He announced it like it was nothing. The kids thought he was kidding. Frankly, so did I.

He assured us that he was not kidding. He also assured us that by the end of the week we would all be able to stand on our heads. He then proceeded to demonstrate how we were

to place our hands and our elbows to form a triangle of support. He shared that the key was to not try to go too fast but get our balance and then extend our legs.

He also shared that in the beginning it might be helpful to have someone aid in holding our legs steady so that we could get the feel of this new way of seeing the world. Maurice told us, eventually you will begin to see and experience life from a whole new perspective.

As the week went on, we went through this daily exercise in the ridiculous. There was quite a bit of laughter. And there was quite a bit of applause when at last, one by one, we discovered a new center of gravity and new view of things.

Supported Maurice, reminded us, by the Trinity that triangle of hands and elbows, all working together in a delicate balance of delight.

What was interesting, was that in this exercise the nerds and the jocks in the group were on equal ground, some finding their new balance point quickly and others not so much. In that exercise, the world of high school got rearranged. And strangely, a community of mutual support and trust emerged.

And those on the margins, found themselves at the center. Maurice said, now you are beginning to see how Jesus views the world.

So down comes Jesus from the mountain to level things out. To name a rearrangement of the conventional wisdom that presumed you are only blessed when you are wealthy, full and laughing. Jesus stands the world on its head in order to open up a renewed vision of how life is intended to be.

For Jesus, blessing means that the power and presence of God is with you and is working for your transformation and renewal, and that of the world, in every dimension, direction and expression.

And Jesus tells us that for God, it begins at the edge. You may have noticed Jesus' reordering of things is often not very popular. Wasn't popular back in the first century and it's not popular now. Mostly because the world operates on a scarcity mentality stoked by fear.

Turn on the television, check the news on your phone, or wherever you get your news from and you will hear a rehearsal of a narrative that there is not enough to go around. Let's circle the wagons and build more walls because there just isn't enough.

Jesus turns the idea of what it means to be blessed on its head. And in so doing reframes the center and source of one's consolation. Woe to you that are rich Jesus says to me, because you have received your consolation.

I don't know about you, but these are hard words for me to hear. They challenge me to consider what I really believe is the source and the form of my consolation. What is the nature of my enough level? And what form does it take?

And lest we think these questions are only asked by Jesus, we must remember that he speaks in line with the prophets of old. Jeremiah spends much of his verbal capital challenging a vision of life that has narrowed to the point that the margins are not even in the peripheral vision. The prophet Jeremiah challenges me about where have I planted my life. In whom do I really trust?

I am guessing that you have noticed the remarkable continuity that exists between Jeremiah and Jesus. In each of their ministries there is both challenge and promise. The challenge has to do with seeing the world from a downside up point of view.

What I have to think this is really about, at least in part, is a recognition that there is no suffering, and no part of creation that does not matter to God. God places at the center, those

whom the world often thinks of as expendable or of no account.

Maybe that has been you along the way? If that is the case, I want you to hear again or maybe for the first time, that you matter to God, as beloved.

You know these blessings and woes from Jesus are actually grounded in something much larger than a few pithy sayings. These pithy sayings have power because they arise out of a vision for the life that really is life.

Some of you who know me, know that I have a penchant for trying to discern what is at the heart of things. For example, when we speak of justice, which I know is a huge part of the vocabulary of life around here at First Church, what are we really talking about.

Is it simply fairness? Justice must include fairness at some level. But I have to think this sermon on the plain...where Jesus speaks "on the level" is about whole lot more than just fairness. Is it compensation for loss? Maybe there is some of that. But again, Jesus and Jeremiah along with him press toward something deeper.

What is the vision of justice that you carry in your heart and mind, remembering that there are two sides to the coin of

love, mercy and justice? I'd like to offer an incomplete work in process, a vision that comes not from me, but from this sermon on the plain of Jesus and the words of Jeremiah.

Call it a definition or a picture, if you like....

Here goes. Justice is an arrangement of life empowered by agape love (aka God), where all God's children can freely use their gifts, without fear, for the upbuilding of the common good and the good of creation so that all may flourish and share in God's abundance and joy.

When Jesus begins his ministry and he reads from the prophet Isaiah, announcing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Is this not an announcement of a vision of life as God intends it? Does this not turn the world on its head?

I wonder if you have ever noticed that sometimes life just takes over, and this compelling vision of flourishing fades for all kinds of reasons? I wonder if you have ever just needed encouragement to remember and in remembering to know that this promise is really for everyone, including you.

I have to think this is why Jesus includes the woes. Because the world can so easily divide into "us and them" however

those words might be defined in any particular moment. The unitive vision of a world made new gets fragmented to the point that the whole creation suffers.

It can be hard to remember. I know... because I sometimes suffer from Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder...SADD.

But just when I least expect it, just when it seems the clouds of the current day will win the day, God arrives in the form of circle larger than me that changes me and inspires me, even as I am challenged.

That happened from me just outside this building a short while back, on the day of the dedication of the Washington Gladden Social Justice park. You will remember that it was raining for much of that day. I arrived just before the dedication celebration began, having come from Twinsburg where I preached earlier in the day.

Like so many of you, I had my umbrella. As I joined the crowd, I was struck by the weather, that threatened, but did not overcome the declaration that in the shared life of our community there should be spaces set aside. Spaces set aside outwardly and inwardly whereby the vision for a world where all can flourish without fear could not only be given voice.

But also, actually be a springboard for the tangible ministry and action whereby those who are hungry get filled, those who weep discover God's intended joy and those who are at the margins discover that God has placed them at the center.

So I stood with many of you and many others from beyond First Church, and I noticed something. The rain did not fall during the actual ceremony. It occurred to me that when working toward this vision of a world made new, empowered by God's grace, there will always be forces, as Jesus said, that seek to hate, revile, exclude, defame and divide.

There will always be those who want to rain on the parade of justice. Rain on the motion of love that will leave no one out. Rain fear and exclusion.

But then it hit me, even if it rained, the crowd of compassion had come prepared with umbrellas to be a shelter for each other. Is this not the beginning place of love? Then it occurred to me, a rubric from the reign of God...the spirit rising up on a cloudy day when I need to be reminded of things large even as small things were trying command all my attention.

The rubric is three words: saddened, maddened, Gladdened. First, in love, we are called to feel the suffering of the world,

to notice it, to let it penetrate our thinking, our feeling and our being.

Then we are called to get angry about the resistance to the vision of flourishing.

But we cannot stay there. Finally we must be Gladdened... our anger must be channeled in love, by love, for a love that changes the arrangements of life so that all may flourish.

You know, this kind of thing has the power to stand the world on its head. I thank you for your witness and encouragement. I hope that I have offered some of that back to you on the level.

This is the good news. In the words of Jeremiah...It is like a tree planted by the river. You can trust it with your life. Yes! Yes! Yes! Thanks be to God!

Amen and Amen.

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