My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our hearts, strengthener of our souls, and the awakener of our Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

One thing Jesus will never be accused of is being afraid to tell it like it is. It’s probably his defining trait in the Gospel—seeing folks for who they really are, seeing situations for how they both do and do not love and serve God, and understanding that God’s people, as a whole, are doing a lousy job of loving our neighbor. It’s a phenomenon that he also calls out to us on an individual level in Matthew’s Gospel, right? Seeing the toothpick in the eye of someone else while ignoring the log in our own vision. We absolutely love this passage from the Gospel because we think it speaks to us, while not at all being about us.

That’s mostly because our lives are encapsulated in our own experiences. We live in our own skin and only feel our own stuff most of the time. And we also tend to generalize onto everybody else exactly how we feel.

When we’re indignant, we want others to rage with us. When we’re happy, we want others to smile too and celebrate with us. When we’re grieving, we expect others to grieve too. Children struggle with this especially. They have a birthday party and all the attention was on them, and really good, but as soon as it was over, life was back to its routine. Do we remember our self-centered 6 year old selves? But the day’s not over! Hey, wait! Why don’t all the friends and parents keep the focus on me? Kids see through the window of their feelings, looking out and seeing that the world was content to go on about its business, often no matter what was happening inside of them. And the result is a temper-tantrum, right? Children have a hard time understanding that their feelings are often not adopted by those around them.

And as we grow up, our windows look out on more events that shake us up. Losses accumulate as we see economic hardship in families we know. Or maybe we see first-hand a disabling condition affect someone we love. Someone close to us dies. Our world is changed and yet the world moves on. For many, it’s the first crisis of faith, where we have to make sense of our perception as I looked out of the window of our world. A window that increasingly has rain beating upon it, clouding the clear view. We long to see the rain lift, the fog break. But as kids, we could not even open the window, much less know if there was anyone out there. And for many of us, we pray to God to make it all better, unequipped to deal with feelings that seem to threaten our own safety and mortality. We don’t know what to do.

Living in our own skin can be a scary place to be.

In our scripture today, Jesus comes down to a “level place”, and he stands amongst the hurting and troubled. In that level place, he brings the Kingdom of God to us who have gathered there. In that level place, there is not any difference between those who suffer and those who rejoice. In the level place that is God’s Kingdom, we are leveled out, not one higher than another, but neither are we alone. We’ll come to know that maybe by opening the window and sticking our heads out, we’ll get rained on, sure, but we’ll also see others. We’ll come to know that every person around us has their own griefs, fears, and worries. We’ll come to know that by coming to a level place, Jesus comes to level us with one another.

What a comfort. But what a challenge, too.

Because when we start to share our stories, poking our heads out of our own windows of existence to see and speak to others, we don’t feel quite so alone. This leveling out that Jesus does by introducing us to each other, seeing our stories repeated in who we’re talking to right here, right now, will change our lives forever.

And yet, the world only admires the strong. We give trophies to the winners. Monetary bonuses for a job well done. We want our picture taken with politicians and athletes. But Jesus comes and asks us to open up our windows and trust that God’s Kingdom is for us, right here, right now. We’re not alone in our experiences and needs, and we can no longer leave others alone in theirs.

The challenge is that as we recover and heal our wounds, the world closes in. It offers honor, money, reward, notoriety, and instead of remaining on the level we become enamored as being one of the strong, pulling up ourselves by our bootstraps. We become self-made people. “I did it all despite the obstacles”, we tell ourselves. Good for us, the world says. There’s a lot of Facebook hearts sent our way. Americans love a story of triumph, right? We’re back on top. Life is good.

But Jesus is there to say, “Woe to you”, for we have forgotten that it was only with God’s own blessing when we were leveled out that we could truly see and be contented. And when we wanted more of the world, there was less room for God. We can no longer rejoice, even though we have achieved all that was set out for us.

Now I’m not saying that we shouldn’t have goals. Or be grateful for what the world has given us as fruits of our labors. But what I am saying is that when we forget that it is God’s great leveling that gives us peace, we can easily jump from being the recipient of God’s blessings to being a roadblock to others who are hurting and in need of God’s grace right here, right now. It’s not easy work to examine our lives and understand that we may no longer be on the level plain, even though we go to church each week. But when we forget the pain we have experienced, when we do not extend to others an invitation to open their windows, too, when we forget that we too are the least of these that God seeks out, we are not showing the love and faith required of leveled Kingdom of God.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

This is hard stuff. We like to think we’ve overcome our pain to make progress, and never look back again. But what we fail to internalize is that our experience is with us now and always. It is the constant re-opening of that window of our lives, to see others who are just as much in pain as we were and are, that we draw strength to go on. Not to climb a ladder of superiority. But to remind ourselves that we, too, are constantly seeking to make sure that the level plain of God’s Kingdom is here for all and for us. We cannot leave it behind, because it was once here for us, and we must make sure that all who seek wholeness can come here and stay here.

I hope you see that a big part of maintaining and keeping the Kingdom of God alive is in our coffeeshop. We invite others in, to share and to be. But it requires us being present—us sharing ourselves—that will tell others that this place is safe, full of grace, and by the way, has really good snacks.

And for that, thanks be to God, Amen.