My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our God of our hearts, minds, spirits, and souls, God of our dreams and hopes and possibilities for justice, peace, compassion, and mercy, 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.

Jesus stands on “a level place”, and this passage is more commonly known as the Sermon on the Plain. Matthew sets a similar sermon on a Mount to emphasize that Jesus received those teachings from God (Matthew 5-7). But his geographical setting has a different function in the Gospel of Luke. The word “level” in other parts of the Bible often refers to places of corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning (see Jeremiah 9:22; 14:18; 30:4; Daniel 3:1; Joel 1:10, 20; 2: 22; 3:19; Habakkuk 3:17; Zechariah 12:11).

Yet even as the prophets of old described this desolation, the prophets foresaw God renewing the level places. The glory of God, which in Biblical syntax is “salvation”, would be revealed in them (see also Isaiah 40:4, 18; Ezekiel 3:22, 23; 8:4).

Jesus teaches the way of God’s Kingdom—in the midst of the world—as such a level place. While standing in a broken level world, Jesus teaches the ways of the present and coming renewal via the Kingdom of God. Both are true. Luke’s Jesus does not directly urge listeners to make a choice between the ways of blessing and woe, he does present two possibilities which implies such a choice. Luke wants listeners to choose the way of blessing.

Whereas Matthew begins the sermon on the mount with nine beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), Luke 6:20-26 begins the sermon on the plain with four beatitudes and four woes. The word “blessed” here refers to being aware in the present of having a place in the movement towards the Kingdom of God. To be “blessed” does not mean an absence of struggle. Indeed, as 6:22-23 indicates, to be in the community moving towards the realm can invite hatred, exclusion, being reviled, and being defamed as others reject the Kingdom and its witnesses. Let’s hear how it’s interpreted by Eugene Peterson, author of the study bible, “The Message”:

‘Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—skip like a lamb, if you like!’

To be blessed is to live through such opposition aware that the struggle is temporary. Again, quoting Peterson: ‘for even though they don’t like it, I do . . . and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this.’

God knows you, sees you. God will gather the faithful into God’s Kingdom. God ultimately prevails. That’s the blessing, and it’s true this day as much as it was when Jesus said those words.

But we somehow still disbelieve. We want to know how much dirt is poured on our heads in order to turn our lives around. It sure would be nice to be able to see it, know the timetable, and give us a task list for how to make it happen now. As long as it doesn’t cost too much.

We’ve talked about this. God doesn’t work that way, in these huge theophanies of lightning and thunder. God’s more subtle than that. Jesus continually calls us to deny our selfishness, and it’s up to us to make that choice. And we tell ourselves we are hardwired for survival of the fittest, we can’t help it. We are addicts. We doubt our way out of God.

Mainline protestants are in a peculiar relationship to this passage. For many are aware that today’s world is a fractured “level place” Luke describes. But I don’t think many congregations hunger for (much less weep for) the level of social transformation implied in the Kingdom of God. Most congregations today in the long-standing denominations are in situations more like that of those of Luke’s world who had wealth, were full, and laughing, and were in good social standing according to the standards of the old age.

How do we manifest the Kingdom of God in the midst of the level places we encounter? Only a few contemporary Christians and congregations are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed because of their witness. It is a witness that we ourselves talk about and are content to let individuals pursue their passions, but as a community of faith, we are afraid to offend anyone by proclaiming God’s justice and Jesus’ teachings.

A simple place to start is to hold fast to witnesses that are widely attacked. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are modern terms for what Jesus calls ALL the people of the world. All people—not just Christians, for God is the God of all creation, and certainly not special to us living here in the good old USA. Not just white folks, either, who seem to be perfectly okay to keep passing laws which restrict the dignity and rights of others who seek equal access to education, jobs, and voting rights. Not just men and women, but transexuals and transgender persons who fight for their very personhood and creation as images of God and who are in danger of losing equal protection under the law for such basics as healthcare, marriage, and the ability to parent a child. We refuse to understand by including people in their fulness and wholeness, we invite different perspectives on how we might see the world. But we have to have eyes that can see, and ears that can hear, and many in the majority have closed both.

So let’s make this a little more clear, because this is important. DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) isn’t a takeover. It’s a recognition for what always should have been. Black Lives Matter isn’t a takeover. It’s a recognition against structural racism to demand a level playing field in the first place, 60 years after the “I Have a Dream” speech. And yet instead of recognizing our hateful past as a nation, we are still quashing equal opportunity and not choosing eternal life under God.

God says, “I created all of you, because I love you. Live in love and dignity, protecting others along the way whom I also created. Especially when you see suffering. Do what you can to help them.” So let’s engage the issues as Jesus, who by the way is God, lays them out in scripture. It’s hard work, for sure, but as followers of Christ, that’s what we are tasked to do—live outside ourselves, for the sake of building the Kingdom.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Equality and Equanimity, which we have dwelt on a lot here in this Church, doesn’t teach retaliation or retribution. Victims of abuse and mistreatment unleashed on them do not respond in kind, or by playing dead, or whining.

Dr. Martin Luther King and Jesus agree that the non-violent Kingdom response principles of love, forgiveness, and generosity are the only actions which will forment change. Only by believing that God is grateful to the ungrateful and selfish will we understand what is being said here, and the reversal of fortune is both present and future: the suffering of the level plain is the only way that the message holds resonance. But it also demands that we act, finally, to speak out in witness for those whom we profess to serve.

Thanks be to God, Amen.