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On the Level

Luke 6:17a

This passage from Luke, it doesn't pull any punches. Just before our reading, Jesus has been up on the mountaintop, calling his disciples and now he has come down from that high place only to find hurting people. He joins them on this level ground; he meets them in their distress. And these are the words of comfort he has to offer: blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, the grieving, the despised. As if this weren't disturbing enough, he continues: woe to the rich, woe to the full, woe to the laughing, woe to the loved. Unlike the gospel of Matthew's version of this same teaching, no caveats are offered, no wiggle room. While Matthew reports Jesus as saying, "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*; blessed are those who hunger *for righteousness*, Luke offers only a blunt lesson: blessed are the poor. Period. Blessed are the hungry. Period. And, unlike Luke, Matthew begins and ends with blessedness. No woes are offered. For Matthew, it is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, his words from on high. For Luke, Jesus comes down from the mountain and stands on the flat ground. This is no message from the peak, no high-falutin' language. In this passage, Jesus just levels with us. He tells us like it is and, what he says, we probably don't want to hear.

Notice what Jesus does *not* say. He does not say, woe to you who are rich, unless you give half of your riches away. He does not say, woe to you who are full, except if you volunteer in soup kitchens. He does not offer a way out or even a way forward. He simply levels with us: Woes are upon those who are rich and full, laughing and loved, while blessings are upon those who are poor and hungry, grieving and despised. *They just are*. On the surface this may seem like a condemnation of our bank accounts, and this could very well be true, but down deep it is about even more than that. Jesus is condemning being satisfied.

He looks to the people and he says, Do not be satisfied with this world. Do not be filled up with what it has to offer, expecting no more than its empty calories. For if you are surrounded by the world's riches you will never know the meaning of true blessedness. If you are constantly filled up with the mundane you will never know that hunger for something more, that blessing of hunger I have placed within you. So it is not a question of judgment from Jesus. It is a question of fact: It is terribly difficult to experience God's blessings when you are rich, full, when everything is easy. Only when we allow ourselves to feel some hunger or poverty will we know the blessings God has to offer.

This is difficult. It is difficult to say and difficult to explain. I am not saying that we should empty our bank accounts, although Jesus might be. I *am* saying that we have a great deal that is stacked up between us and our Creator and our own particular burden. Our western, middle to upper-middle class American burden is to remove some of those piles so God may have a chance to work on us and in us and through us. This may seem like some heady concept that does not intersect with our day to day but this is not true. It is our day to day. Here is but one example:

The season of Lent begins in only ten days which means our household has begun its annual picking season. We have begun picking what we want to give up for those 40 Lenten days. Some past favorites have included giving up meat or chocolate or soda. Another has been giving up solid food for

one day each week. Some years I've pretty much ignored the discipline and taken a cue from my father, who is renowned for only giving up a non-seasonal fruit (for example: watermelon!).

This year it will not be watermelon. In fact, it will not be any food or sweet. It will be the television. For some of you this may sound like an easy choice, not too difficult, but—at the risk of revealing my Generation X status and confessing too much—this choice terrifies me. I would sooner give up meat; give up meals; give up sleep!; than give up tv.

Yet it is this year's choice. It was not chosen because I think tv is evil and rotting my brain and its programming too immoral (though all of this is probably true). It was chosen because I have allowed it to fill me up. It was chosen because it is keeping me satisfied. In short, it was chosen because of these disturbing words from Jesus. Now this is embarrassing to admit but I can arrive home and allow it, the television, to fill the role of distraction, of companion, of out-and-out panacea. While it is on I do not need to do the difficult work of keeping up with old friends who live far away. While its programming runs I can push aside the difficult questions of my day, much less my life. I can convince myself that my own strength is enough to carry me through and I'm hobbling along just fine, thank you very much! I can be filled up by its noise so there is no need to deal with silence. I can be satisfied, over and over again, by its empty calories that taste good for the moment but will never really keep the hunger away.

Now some of you are thinking right now, boy that's a lot of power she's given the television! You would be right. And perhaps for you it is not the television that is filling you up. Perhaps it is your work you have given the power, or your balance sheet, or your children or your problems. Whatever it is for you, Jesus tells us it is keeping us from God's blessings. As long as we are wrapped up in these riches, surrounded by our false satisfactions, we are not being blessed, we are being cursed.

Taken seriously, this may make us feel a bit queasy and that is only appropriate for, with Jesus, the ground is always shifting beneath our feet. As frightening as his teaching sounds, he is only sharing a promise we've heard before. His mother sang it even before he was born: "My soul magnifies the Lord," she sang, "for he 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." His cousin John sang it too: "Every valley shall be filled," he cried, "and every mountain and hill shall be made low." While it is a song his mother sang, his cousin cried, but it is his father's tune. It is God's song that all the levels have changed. Mountains are no longer on top and valleys are no longer below. The rich are actually poor and the poor are actually rich. The high places take on a crucifixion while the dugout tombs take on new life. The ground has shifted. It is a hard truth to hear, even harder to accept, but the upcoming 40 days of Lent are all about recognizing that shift; about recognizing our own poverty, real poverty, even in the midst of so much excess. Recognizing it and slowly stripping it away, removing one pile after another so we too can feel the blessing of hunger: hunger for God, hunger for God's kingdom to come, hunger for true satisfaction.

So what is filling you up? Keeping you distracted, keeping you satisfied? Jesus has come down from the mountain to level with us: What you have been calling blessings, may end up being your greatest woe. So strip it away, pile after pile, so you can meet Jesus on level ground. So you can come to this table, this most level of all places, where Jesus will feed those of us who are hungry and those of us who are so lost we have forgotten what hunger is. Come and be fed the food that will truly fill you. Come and be satisfied with the blessings that can only come from God. Amen.