

LEVELING THE FIELD
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Mayer
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 13, 2022

Some of you know that my paternal grandfather, Charles Mayer, was a left-handed pitcher in the Brooklyn Dodgers' organization in the early 1900s. My grandpa died before I was born; but I have a treasured photograph of him on my desk in my library, in his old-fashioned collared uniform, with a sign in the background that reads "Scranton and Lehigh." I've loved the picture all my life; and in my boyhood, it inspired fantasies of my own career as a famous Major League pitcher.

I did seem to have my grandfather's arm as a Little Leaguer. I was a good pitcher and could throw a strike from center field to home plate on one bounce. Unfortunately, the resemblance ended there, as I couldn't hit or catch well, and worse, in center field I was often the kid with his back to home plate, practicing his pitching wind-up. The coach would have to yell for me to turn around, interrupting my fantasies of conquest on the mound.

It was specifically that experience of having my fantasies of grandeur interrupted, being brought back to reality and the real game on the real field, that came to mind as I began to reflect this week on the Sermon on the Plain. This is Luke's version of Matthew's more famous Sermon on the Mount, and the difference in topography is the most important difference between the two versions. Matthew's mountain puts Jesus in a traditionally holy place, where one is thought to be close to God. But Luke has Jesus pray on the mountain all night, call his disciples up to him when day comes and choose twelve of them (Luke 6:12-16), then come down from the mountain with the disciples and stand "on a level place." (Luke 6:17) And listen to the subtle difference in language. In Matthew's version, on the mountain, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." (Matt. 5:3) But in Luke, standing in the level place, Jesus says "Blessed are you who are poor." (Luke 6:20) *You who are poor*, not *the poor in spirit*. It is a direct personal address to his audience; there is no speaking from on high. Luke's Jesus has many purposes in speaking on the plain rather than on the mountain; one is most certainly to make it clear to the newly chosen twelve that they had been called to be with the people on the ground, not on the mountain where there was danger of seeing people's struggles abstractly. No fantasies of grandeur here: this was to be real life on a level field.

"Come down from the mountain with me and look at the real world" sums up what Jesus is saying to his disciples. There is poverty, there is hunger, there is weeping, there is hatred and exclusion and defamation. (6:20-22) Look and face it--this is what I care about, says Jesus, and this is what you are called to care about. For my followers, there is no looking away from suffering.

In a world that seems hell-bent on looking away, it is the task of the church today to look squarely at what is true. In the recent, controversial Netflix production "Don't Look Up," two obscure astronomers discover that a large comet is six months away from striking the earth and causing massive destruction. I don't want to give away too much, because if you haven't seen it, I hope you'll watch it for yourself. Suffice it to say that corporate and government interests join forces to distract the people from fearing the comet, selling them on a crackpot plan to mine the comet for precious metals needed to make sophisticated new smart phones while it is hurtling towards earth.

The movie's writer and director, Adam McKay, intends it as a metaphor for the state of the world with respect to climate change. And indeed, we see big corporations leaping to embrace environmentalism now, promising green products that will allow us to continue the lives to which we have become accustomed. But this idea is absurd on its face. In a brilliant article in *The Christian Century* entitled "Climate change is a symptom of deeper planetary dysfunction" (September 8, 2021

issue), Episcopal priest Ragan Sutterfield writes that “[t]he industrial domination of life on the planet” has created “an increasing sense of bio-paucity.” Habitats have been destroyed by mega-farms, logging, urban sprawl, and countless other factors, all driven by profit and all reliant on tremendous energy use, what Fr. Sutterfield calls “the assault of human avarice on the diverse life of the planet.” Electric cars, windmills, and solar panels, while important steps in the right direction, will not end this assault.

Standing on the Plain with Jesus, we in the Church are called to look squarely at the horrible consequences of human avarice and hear the woes that he pronounces alongside the blessings: “woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full now, woe to you who are laughing now, woe to you when all speak well of you.” (6:24-26) Climate change is not another opportunity for corporate profit. Woe to those who think it is, and to those who comfort themselves by buying green products and thinking they’ve done their part and the problem is solved.

No, it is ever so much more that we are called to. We are called to look up at all the comets that are hurtling towards us. We are called to understand that not one of us, rich or poor, is safe from the dangers, and that only by coming together in the common purpose of learning to live lives oriented towards sustainability, not profit, can we hope to survive as a species. It is nothing less than radical conversion to this way of life that we are called. *This* is what discipleship looks like in 2022.

My beloved Grace Episcopal Church in Ossining: The Sermon on the Plain is God’s Word for you as you go forward into your future together. Model for the world what it looks like to live together in love, for one another and for all of Creation, on the level field of Christian community. Turn away from fantasy; look up at what is true and face it. And remember this: when you look up in faith, you will see not only hard truths but the face of God, who will guide you and bring you safely home.