

**“You Stay Blessed Now”**  
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 2/16/25

Each week I have the joy and privilege of working with Rebecca Thornburgh to curate the cover image for the bulletin. I send her my text for preaching and she sends me options for artwork that either depicts the scene or somehow captures themes from the reading. This Wednesday she sent me the usual slate of options with a disclaimer: “I know we're in Luke this week, but – as you may be well aware, and as ChatGPT and Google AI will tell you – there are few (if any?) paintings of the Luke 6 story of Jesus preaching. So I'm offering a selection of images of the Sermon on the Mount instead.”

Rebecca, ChatGPT and Google AI are right – there are few paintings of Jesus preaching “on a level place,” or “on the plain,” in Luke chapter 6. It's much more common for artists to depict Matthew's version of this sermon, known as the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount also includes Beatitudes, statements of divine blessing that begin with “Blessed are those,” or “happy are you.” But Matthew's version of the Beatitudes tends to be much more popular in art, and better known to us. So on the front cover of the bulletin you have James Tissot's rendering of Jesus preaching not on the plain, but on the mount. And in a few minutes the choir will offer Arvo Pärt's musical setting of the Beatitudes, but again from Matthew, not from Luke.

Why does Luke's Sermon on the Plain always lose out to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount? Well, Matthew softens things up a bit. In the Sermon on the Mount there are no woes, only blessings. And those blessings tend to be easier to apply to ourselves. Hear Matthew's version and you'll see what I mean:

Matthew 5:2 Then Jesus began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Blessed are those who mourn – ok, we all mourn sometimes; no matter how we try to avoid it, eventually loss comes to all of us. Blessed are those who are merciful – we can work on being merciful, definitely. Blessed are the peacemakers – yep, we know we should be working toward peace in our homes and in the world. I'll try to do better at that. Ok, we can find ourselves here, we've got confirmation that we're blessed by Jesus, yes, good.

But it may be harder to find ourselves in the blessings of the Sermon on the Plain. For every blessing Jesus pronounces in his sermon, he offers a parallel woe. [hand up, eyes up] Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. [other hand up, eyes down] But also, woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. But also, woe to you who are full now, for you will mourn and weep. Blessed are you who when people hate you on account of the Son of Man, for your reward is great in heaven. But also, woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Matthew spiritualizes Jesus's blessings – “blessed are you who are poor” in Luke becomes “blessed are the poor in spirit” in Matthew. “Blessed are you who are hungry” in Luke becomes “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” in Matthew. In Luke, Jesus is dealing with real physical conditions, with economic hardship. When he says blessed are the poor he really means those who are scraping to get by. When he says blessed are the hungry, he really means those who don't have enough to eat.

And so it may be difficult for those of us who live in the relative prosperity of the United States of America to find ourselves blessed by Jesus in these words. If we're being honest, we're more like the people to whom Jesus offers woes: the rich, the full, those who have our needs met in this life. And so I think we gravitate to Matthew's version of the story, to blessings that sound like they could include us.

But our three year cycle of readings, the lectionary, brings us not to Matthew's Beatitudes today; it brings us to Luke's. So here we sit, with the discomfort of another passage that we trust to be good news but doesn't necessarily sound like it to us. Jesus keeps doing this in Luke, keeps telling it like it is, no matter if it makes people angry or uncomfortable. And I want us to resist the urge to skip ahead to an explanation that will make us feel better about what Jesus has to say, though of course I believe there is a word of grace here for us.

But together let's resist our compulsion to make like Matthew and spiritualize these blessings – not that there's anything wrong with the direction Matthew takes things. But instead of saying “Oh, blessed are the poor” really means “blessed are the poor in spirit,” let's take Jesus at his word for the moment. Blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are hungry now, blessed are you who weep now, blessed are you who are hated and excluded and reviled and defamed.

Maybe this doesn't sound like much good news to those of us with the comfort of everything we need, but it is a profound word of hope to those who are suffering. To children who are starving in Gaza; to immigrants who haven't gone to work in several weeks because they fear ICE will raid their workplaces; to the people in our own city who struggle to make ends meet, despite living in the richest nation in the world; to our siblings in Christ who work for refugee resettlement organizations like Lutheran World Relief and Catholic Social Services who have recently lost their federal grants based on the false accusation that they are money launderers...

To our neighbors in need, to our neighbors who are hated and persecuted and reviled because of their service to the Son of Man, this is indeed joyous good news. God sees you, Jesus says. God knows what you're going through. God blesses you. And God will put things right. Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the kingdom of God. It belongs to you, yes you, right now. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled, you can count on that. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh – God will bring you justice and joy. The God who sees and knows and understands is working to right every wrong and heal every ill and turn the world upside down – or right side up, as the case may be.

And what about those of us receiving woes instead of blessings? If we want to follow Jesus, we turn our gaze where Jesus turns his gaze: to the poor, the hungry, the mourning, the excluded. We take the time to listen, to hear their grief and learn what they are going through. And then we try to align our priorities with Jesus's. To feed, to heal, to lift up, to give our lives for the things God cares about, the people God cares about.

The Instagram algorithm has always been a bit mystifying to me, and even more so the past few weeks – so I'm really not sure why it was that the other day I was fed a video from a lawn care professional who goes by SB Mowing. This young guy stood in front of a modest house with white vinyl siding badly in need of a power wash, talking to an older lady with a cane about her overgrown yard. In the first part of the video, she

explains that she's called a number of other companies, but no one has been willing to help. She's been threatened by the city, she says; if she doesn't get the overgrowth under control they will come out and do it for her, to the tune of \$240, which she doesn't have.

Though I think SB Mowing is in Wichita, I recognized the kind of homeowner and the kind of house from church work trips to economically depressed rural Maine: an older person who used to be able to do for herself; a house that was once well-kept but is now looking run down; few resources of money or family connection to help out; a city government more concerned with the appearance of the property than the person inside.

And here comes the lawn guy. He listens as the woman shares her story of what she's been through. And then he offers to take care of it for free. The next several minutes of the video are a time lapse of him edging, sweeping, mowing, cutting down volunteer trees, and leaving the place looking neat and tidy. The lady comes out with tears in her eyes and tells him he's an answer to prayer.

"Oh, that's nice," I thought when the video finished playing. But the more I thought about it, the deeper that minute and 30 seconds seemed. The lawn guy could have focused on himself, could have cut the video so it was just before and after photos with the time-lapse part in the middle. But instead he gave a significant portion of the video to the woman telling her story, letting us hear her struggles in her own words. And the finished product - the lawn looked nice, but it's not like he brought out a TV-style home makeover team to plant a garden she could never maintain and make the house gleam for the after photo. He just did what he could with the tools he had: a listening ear, a trailer full of landscaping equipment, a day of hard work, and his iPhone.

What's your equivalent of a trailer full of tools and an iPhone? What is this church's equivalent of a trailer full of tools and an iPhone? God has blessed every single one of us with gifts we can give in service to the upside down, right side up kingdom that Jesus proclaims. Let's be about that together.