

Three weeks ago, we heard about Jesus preaching his first sermon in his hometown synagogue. On that day as he addressed the congregation, Jesus claimed these words as his Mission Statement, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” And, from that point on, his ministry was about living into those words. Today, Jesus speaks to his followers, those who have made a real **commitment** to follow him, and he lays out his Vision Statement.

As Jesus comes down from the mountain to the plain to speak, it is clear the writer of Luke’s gospel wants us to know that Jesus’ words today are spoken to the disciples, to the church, to **us**, to all who follow him. Jesus looks out on the followers who stand before him and sees the poor, the weak, the oppressed, the women, and the slaves, and he begins preaching a radical sermon proclaiming the **promise** of a **new** society. In this promise, he is **not** talking about some ideal utopia. This sermon is a call to a radical life of discipleship, **a way of living in the world that turns the way of the world upside down**, because what he is essentially saying is, “Blessed are all of you who are disregarded by the powerful, for **you are** God’s beloved community.” It is interesting, as Jesus lays out his vision of a new community, he blesses history’s losers! The blessings he proclaims

were truly a protest against injustice! No wonder it was radical. And, no wonder it is still radical today!

Before we begin to look at what Jesus is saying, it is important that we understand what the word “blessing” means as used here in scripture. The Greek word for “blessing” ascribed to Jesus in these Beatitudes is *makarios*. This word means “happy” or “favor.” In Christian scriptures, the word specifically means **God’s favor**, often called “**grace.**” So, what Jesus is saying is “Favored are the poor, God’s grace **is** theirs.” He is **not** saying “Be happy for poverty.” Essentially, he is saying to the people, “God privileges the poor. If you are poor, you **are** favored by God. **God’s** gifts are with **you.**” As one commentator puts it, “The elite in God’s kingdom, the **blessed** ones, are those who are at the bottom of the heap of humanity.” In the culture of that time, this was shocking, and I must say it is still shocking in our time. Jesus turns things upside down and drives home some topsy-turvy news regarding the order of things in **God’s** kingdom.

Jesus is speaking directly to the disciples and each one of **us** as he invites us into **his** holy venture to **live out** our faith. Jesus is **not** describing an ideological agenda or a political platform. He does **not** provide us with an abstract or empty definition of discipleship. He is **not** listing for us

qualifications describing some “how to” method to get into heaven. Jesus **is** describing a **vision** of God’s reign which he totally and completely **embodies**. What he **is** doing is calling all of us to become faithful and effective agents of God’s **reign** right here and right now. And, quite frankly, for those of us who live in middle class America, his words are so very challenging. The “rules of engagement” of Jesus’ reign stand in sharp contrast to the presumed rights of the prosperous as he talks about wealth, abundant food, the good stuff of life and all that **we** consider blessings. Jesus’ words and vision are simply at odds with the way things are in **our** lives and in the world. Jesus knows that we are possessed by our possessions and the so called “blessings” **we** feel we have and enjoy. Theologian, Diana Butler Bass, when talking about this passage, says that most people think of blessings in this way:

Blessed are the rich, for they own the best stuff. Blessed are the sexy and glamorous, for everyone desires them. Blessed are the powerful, for they control the kingdoms of the earth. Blessed are those who get everything they ever wanted; they alone will be satisfied. Blessed are the famous, for their reward is eternal life. Money, beauty, power, achievement, and fame – we hold these things in esteem. If only we had them, or just one of them, we would be blessed. (Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks, pl 140.)

Yes, these aspects of life are what **we** tend to name as “blessings.” But, Jesus sees these as characteristics of the **lost** and proclaims **woe** to any of us who find ourselves looking at life in this way. By proclaiming **woe**

to this way of life, Jesus announces the evil and injustice in our way of living and thinking. Jesus says the poor and the hungry are the ones who are blessed or favored, for their fortunes **are** going to be reversed. He says, “Are you weeping? You are blessed because you **will** laugh. Do people hate, exclude, and revile you on account of the Son of Man? Jump for joy, for your reward is great in heaven; their grandparents hated and excluded the prophets too.” Jesus is saying God is **not** impressed with what **we** consider blessings. In fact, all that we consider “blessings” misrepresents his message. Oh, yes, Jesus is again turning this world, our thinking, and even our conventional assumptions about religion upside down. Jesus **blesses** those who suffer, and he **curses** those whose wealth, comfort, and prestige are built upon exploiting that same suffering.

Now, quite honestly, as we live in the cushioned environment of our so called “blessings,” many of us would probably say, “I am not poor, but I identify with the poor,” or “I work with the poor,” or maybe even “I send money to the poor, I care about the poor.” We might even want to quibble about the definition of “poor,” or “hungry” or “weeping.” Surely, we the faithful, are among the blessed. So, if we are honest with ourselves, we need to ask, “If we are not the poor, the hungry, the weeping, or the

excluded, what are we to hear from this so-called “good news?” Pastor Laura Sugg, when thinking about this question, suggests:

Again, remember Jesus first sermon. Luke’s Jesus is fulfilling God’s compassion for the oppressed. In that first sermon, Jesus’ first words to people in Luke’s Gospel repeat the words from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” (4:18a) Throughout Luke’s Gospel, Jesus lives this out these words by talking with those on the margins, challenging the status quo, and convicting those who feel certain they are righteous. (*Feasting on the Word*, p. 240.)

The kingdom of God that Jesus embodies is **not** some abstract theological term about a time and place the world has never known. Jesus is calling us to be faithful agents of God’s reign right here and right now. God’s kingdom, God’s reign, breaks through when we **love** our enemies. It takes hold when we do **good** to those who hate us. It comes alive when we **bless** those who curse us. It shines brightly when we **pray** for those who abuse or mistreat us. It shows up when we **honor** the request of the beggars and work to change the economic structure that creates injustice. When we live our lives by the principle of “do unto others as you would have them do to you,” and when we love **all** others as God calls us to love, we truly live out our citizenship in God’s kingdom and bear witness to God’s reign.

I must say, living this kind of life is not easy. In fact, it is very difficult. It **is** the way of the cross. It means we must become **vulnerable** and that

is a condition most of us would rather avoid. But Jesus is always unsettling us and, as he tells us that the order of things in God's rule is reversed, we discover that life with God means knowing what poverty and hunger and sorrow and being cursed look like. It means knowing how it **feels** to be overlooked and discounted. It means knowing what it is like to be hated. And it means **living in solidarity all others** and **admitting** our total **dependence** upon God. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," he upended and overturned the politics of blessing. He preached blessings were **more** than happiness. They were a **social vision** showing what God desires for the world. And, as New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson says, this **vision** is indeed the great theme of Luke's entire gospel. Mary first articulates this vision when she finds out she will give birth to a son, and Jesus then claims his mission, lives it, and lives into that social vision throughout his entire ministry. Professor Johnson writes:

God reverses human status and perception: in a downward movement, [God] scatters the arrogant, pulls down the mighty, sends the rich away empty. But God also, in an upward movement, exalts the lowly, fills the hungry, and takes the hand of [the poor]. Precisely such a reversal is announced by Jesus in his Beatitudes, his blessings and woes, and it is enacted by him in the narrative of his entire ministry. (Gospel of Luke in the Sacra Pagina Series, Volume 3; Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1991; p. 44.)

People of God, as Jesus' disciples, we too are called to live Jesus' mission and live into Jesus' **vision** for the sake of this needy, hurting world.