

Grace and peace to you from God, our Creator, and from our savior, Jesus Christ, who came to bring good news to the poor. Amen.

This one always used to make me squirm a bit... you know? No matter how much I shifted in my seat... I could not escape its conviction.

We are still getting to know each other, but you have probably figured out that I love to laugh...

And, of course, I like to be comfortable... and yes, I hope to maintain my good reputation.

But when I read this... it's like Jesus is standing there in front of me... shaking his head and looking disappointed.

I don't like that.

But I know I'm not alone. We all like our comforts, and we all prefer financial security and a positive reputation.

So why does Jesus say... woe to us... woe to us who are rich... woe to us who are filled... woe to us who are laughing and well thought of.

Woe to us... who put our trust... our faith... in our earthly resources...

I want to take a little detour and tell you about a time in my life when my faith just... exploded... my spiritual AH-HA moment!

I've been a Lutheran all my life. My parents brought me to church every Sunday when I was little, I was baptized and confirmed in the Lutheran church.

There were some years in college and as a young adult that I didn't attend regularly... but church was my habit, and I valued the community that was available to me there.

But when it came to my faith... well... I thought I had faith, but looking back, I don't think I fully understood it...

I believed in God, but I didn't truly understand what it meant to be *encountered* by the *living* Christ... until about 12 years ago.

That was when our youngest daughter was 2 years old, and I was home alone with her when she had a seizure.

By the way... she is aware that I'm telling this story.

I didn't fully understand what was happening, and I was terrified... I didn't know how to help her.

I called my parents, and I called 911

We ended up at the hospital, where the seizures continued... and she was eventually diagnosed with epilepsy, but they couldn't figure out *why* she had it.

So for the next several months, we were in and out of the hospital... tests and specialist visits and all sorts of things were happening.

And the medical bills were just... soaring... we had insurance, but it didn't matter... the amount of the debt became comical for us...

Bill was the primary earner in our family... working as a graphic designer for a tiny, struggling, family-run graphic design firm... and I worked for the church as the bookkeeper and the youth minister.

We were not wealthy, but prior to this event, we were at least keeping our heads above water.

And then... a few months into Kara's medical adventures, Bill was laid off... on the day after Christmas.

Suddenly, we were in deep poverty. The kind where you legitimately do not know where your next meal is coming from.

It was very scary.

The benefit, however, of being that deep in poverty is that Kara qualified for subsidized health insurance for children, and the amount we owed stopped ballooning.

And... at least at that time, there were still social safety nets that gave us some breathing room on our mortgage, so we didn't lose our house.

And also, tending to Kara's medical needs became a time-consuming responsibility... and since Bill wasn't working, he was home and was able to give the extra time needed, and work with the doctors to get her stabilized.

And as for our next meal... well... our church community showed up in huge ways. They brought casseroles by on hospital days... groceries would appear on our doorstep, and Meijer gift cards showed up in the mail.

There was an abundance.

They checked in on us... they held us... they prayed with us and for us.

They surrounded us with so much love and support, that even though we felt we were free-falling, we never hit bottom.

And every time I looked at them... they absolutely shined with Christ's light... and I finally understood... this is how Christ meets us in our most difficult moments...

This is how Christ *ministers* to us...loves us... holds us... surrounds us with peace.

I didn't recognize Christ in my community before because I was too busy with all my stuff... my hands were too full of my own earthly treasure...

I was too used to being one of the helpers... I had no idea what it meant to be the one in need.

Only once my hands were empty did I become ready to receive the fullness of God's blessing... and only through God's grace could I humble myself enough to receive it.

In receiving this gift of grace, my awareness opened up, and I finally got it... that all the earthly treasure we had before, and all we have now... was always, and will always be, a gift given to us, meant to be shared...

And so it is with joy that I endeavor to bring Christ's light to others, just as others brought it to us.

I had to learn this lesson of seeing Jesus the hard way... maybe you don't have to – maybe you're not as hard-headed as me... but I am forever grateful that Jesus met me where I was and showed me grace.

What else could I possibly do after that... but follow him?

That's what Jesus does... he meets us exactly where we are... to call us into discipleship. And if we miss the cue... he'll try again.

Just like in our gospel text, Jesus met the people on the plain... all those people, he met them on a level place... no one higher or lower than the others.

He met the very Jewish people from Jerusalem and Judea... the very Gentile people from Tyre and Sidon... disciples... followers of Jesus... those seeking healing... and all the different people in between.

He meets them all... on a level place... and he heals them all.

But to his disciples... to those who are following him in his mission... he explains that the kingdom of God belongs to those who show up empty-handed.

Blessed are you who are poor... hungry... Blessed are you who are weeping

Jesus turns their understanding of the world... upside down... just like he did for me.

He is... re-orienting their priorities, and not all are going to accept this new world order...

But... he still healed them.... he healed them all... Because he still loves them.

Because Christ is still Christ... and the invitation is always there to open our hearts and turn our minds to God's ways... to open our hands to receive the goodness of God.

But his mission is plainly stated... Jesus came to bring good news to the poor.

That time in our life with Kara and experiencing poverty... it re-oriented our priorities and opened our eyes to see Christ all around us.

In time, Kara's epilepsy stabilized, and she's doing great... and Bill found a new and better job. We're doing ok...

...and I don't think Jesus is disappointed about that.

Because, like I said, our priorities are different... we now consider that what we have is a gift from God, and gifts are meant to be shared.

And, we understand now how much we are all connected, and how much we need each other.

We understand that it is not ok for us to be satisfied in our wealth if our neighbor is starving.

...what good is our freedom and privilege if our neighbor is held captive and oppressed.

The blessings and woes Jesus proclaims are not two separate ideas... Jesus is not saying that God is *only* with the poor.

God is with *all* the people... *always*... and Jesus is calling our awareness to our connection to *all of them*, but most especially... to those who are most in need.

Those who are deeply in need or despairing are uniquely positioned to recognize that Jesus blesses them and offers encouragement... and ministers to them through others.

And when we are so full of our own treasure that we have forgotten where it truly came from, Jesus brings words of challenge to remind us that we are connected and bound to all those in our community... and throughout Creation.

These blessings and woes are a call into discipleship... they call us back into the way of Christ, and into a more generous, connected way of life.

After all, we are... one body in Christ.

And so it is with joy and delight that we care for each other and minister to each other... sharing our gifts as we are able and shining Christ's light into the world...

And trusting that when we come before God with empty hands, God will fill them with love and grace and blessing.

Amen.