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The Reverend Margie Baker

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Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the grieving. Blessed are the meek.

I love these words. I love the way Matthew writes them. I love the shorter version in Luke, with only three, sharper, benedictions: blessed are you who are hungry now. Blessed are you who weep now. Blessed are you when people hate you. What comfort I have found in these blessings over the years. Perhaps you've felt it too.

Now, the context of these famous words matters very much. They come at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. After his baptism, after the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus hears that John the Baptist has been arrested, and Jesus gets to work. He goes to Galilee, calls Simon and Andrew, James and John, and begins the work of preaching, teaching, and healing. His work is with, and to, the poor. Jesus— God incarnate— touches and heals the poor who are sick, and the crowds begin to follow him. When we hear “the crowds” in the gospel, it means the poor: not the rich and powerful, not the scribes and pharisees and lawyers, but the poor Jewish people of Roman-occupied Israel, the folk on the margins, to whom Jesus proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”¹

That's the broad context of the Beatitudes— the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, his first public teaching. He begins not with jabs at the pharisees but with the path of blessedness, the path of discipleship. The more specific context also matters. Jesus is speaking not to the crowd but to his disciples. Perhaps the crowd can hear what he says, but the message is for the ones who have dropped their nets, left behind their lives and their livelihoods, and followed Jesus of Nazareth.

¹ Matthew 4:17

For them, these Beatitudes begin their education concerning the kingdom of heaven and what it takes to follow Jesus. Blessed are the poor— give up everything! Blessed are those who mourn— weep for this broken world, do not act as if any of the pain and violence is part of God’s dream! Blessed are the meek— do not be aggressive in your proclamation, but instead be gentle, passive even. This foreshadows Jesus’ own extreme meekness in dying a criminal’s death on the cross. And so on. The Beatitudes for the disciples are a blueprint, a perhaps unachievable code of conduct for which they should strive nonetheless.

But, as is always the case with the gospel, that first audience is not the only audience. There’s also the crowd— poor, many sick who have just been healed or who are waiting to approach Jesus and be healed— and this message is for them. Jesus’ words are still a roadmap of discipleship, still a radical reimagining of what it means to live a godly life, but for the crowds, the words are something else as well. They are a balm, they are hope, they are the promise of the reversals to come. Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven! You who are poor right now: the kingdom of heaven has come near, in the form of God incarnate, and you have a place in it. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. You who mourn right now, who feel immense grief and pain, who groan under occupation, who have lost loved ones: the kingdom of heaven has come near, in the form of God incarnate, and he will comfort you. To those of us who are struggling, who don’t know where the money to pay the bills will come from, who worry about getting food on the table, who are slogging through grief so tangible it threatens to strangle us, the kingdom of heaven has come near, and God is *right here* to comfort us.

We call these topsy-turvy, world-flipping promises reversals, and they are part of the fabric of Jewish theology. In this way the Beatitudes recall the language of the Magnificat, which itself is an echo of the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel. Mary proclaims,

“He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly and meek. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.”²
 The reversals can sound wild to us now, especially to those among us who have plenty, those of us who, judged by a global standard or even by a national standard, are wealthy. It can feel like a threat to the status quo.

And it is. But hear me out.

The first three Beatitudes are absolutely about reversals: blessed are the poor (in Spirit was probably added later, and is important; but don't forget that Jesus really, really, cared for the poor, just like the prophets Hosea, Micah, and Amos to name a few). Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (again, for righteousness was probably added later, and while it matters, so do the actual hungry and poor, as we see in the songs of Mary and Hannah, and in the Old Testament prophets).

This brings us to the third audience, who are neither the disciples gathered at the Lord's feet nor the poor crowds nearby on the mountain, those of us both *then* and *now* who have plenty, who are not hungry, who do not worry about how we'll pay the rent. Jesus speaks to us too, calling us to see the blessedness of the poor, the meek, the sorrowful, and the hungry, and to make their lives better by following the way of Jesus.

Jesus proclaims the blessedness of the poor, the hungry, and the downtrodden because the world does not see their blessedness. Sometimes those who have enough blame those who lack for their very poverty. Sometimes those who are happy blame those who mourn for the source of their grief. And more often, those who have enough simply fail to see the personhood of those in need. In Jesus' time and in our own, we who have plenty seek to *do* for the poor and the lonely, which is great, but Jesus calls us to go further. His words today remind us that the poor and the downtrodden have dignity in their own right,

² Luke 1:52-53, BCP

not just as receptors of our mercy and pity. They are *blessed*. They are seen and loved, *personally*, by God, who promises that what they experience right now will end. This is Good News to the downtrodden and a wake-up call to the comfortable. Do we see the blessedness of the poor? the mourners? the hungry?

The Beatitudes that follow those first four are not about reversals. They aren't about the poor being raised up and the mighty being brought low. Rather, they serve as a blueprint for all who desire to follow Jesus: the disciples at his feet, the crowds gathered on that mountain, and Christians ever since who desire the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says, this is what it looks like to be a part of the kingdom. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, which can also be translated as justice. In Greek and in Hebrew, righteousness and justice are the same thing. Rich or poor, hungry or full, mournful or happy, we are *all* blessed, when we practice mercy and pureness of heart, when we strive for peace and justice.

On this Feast of All Saints, it is so important to hear in Jesus' words not *only* comfort and blessing, not *merely* the promise of heaven, but also a call to right action. These verses are a covenant, grace given beyond our wildest imagination paired with obligation to live out love, mercy, and justice. Saints risk something to follow Jesus. Their blessedness comes not from some unattainable perfection but from responding to God's love with radical adherence to the values in the Beatitudes. Saints fall short, saints miss the mark, but saints continue to strive to live out the Good News and to seek the kingdom of heaven. We are all called to be saints, just as we are all called to be disciples. How will you and I respond to that call? AMEN.