
Prayer for illumination: Almighty God, in a world that is rapidly changing and causing many to fear, we come to you and your word, as Christians throughout the ages have done, To be challenged by your call, and to be comforted by your love. Grant us ears to hear your word today. Amen.

I have a boyhood memory of my grandmothers, mother, and various aunts and women from the church doing needlepoint. I always admired their perseverance and attention to detail. I even gave it a go once, but it wasn't really the thing for me. Out of curiosity, I dipped into Pinterest to see what were some popular sayings that people were

- “Good friends are like antiques they grow more precious with time”
- “All Guests Must Be Approved by the Dog”

And of course there are Scriptures:

- “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15)
- “Peace on Earth - Goodwill to All.”
- “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” (Proverbs 3:5)
- “Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord.” (Psalm 31:24)

I was interested to notice that there are many needlepoint samplers of the eight Beatitudes from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. However, in my search, I couldn't find Luke's version of the Beatitudes, which is our text for today.

I wonder why that is?

I mean, it would be easier to stitch Luke's version because Luke lists only four Beatitudes compared to Matthew's eight. Matthew's sound so much more poetic. Luke's are not as poetic, in fact, they are less ethereal, e.g., Matthew says “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Luke is downright blunt.

Luke is not concerned with the esoteric “poor in spirit”

Luke says: Blessed are you who are poor

Luke is not concerned with Matthew's “hungry for righteousness,”

Luke says: Blessed are you who are hungry now
Luke is not concerned with Matthew's mourners,
Luke says: Blessed are you who bawl your eyes out

Perhaps, if you've been poor, hungry, or crying your eyes out, these are welcome, even surprising words. "Blessed," *makarios* in Greek, means happy, fortunate, or favored.

A scholar whom I greatly appreciate, Diana Butler Bass, writes this about "blessed,":

"Blessing is not just happiness, but favor. In the Christian scriptures, the word specifically means God's favor, often called "grace" or "abundance." "Favored are the poor" or "Gifted are the poor" would be equally valid ways of making sense of *makarios*.

The sense of the Beatitudes is *not* "If you are poor, God will bless you" or "If you do nice things for the poor, God will bless you." Nor is it "Be happy *for* poverty." Instead, "Blessed are the poor" could be read, "God privileges the poor." If you are poor, you are favored by God. God's gifts are with you.

The "Blessed" were the big shots of the ancient world, the upper crust, those who lived above all the worries of normal existence. The poor, "the losers," [– "parasites" even, and] had to live with shame. Even back then, the blessed were the rich, not the poor.

She goes on to say that,

In the Roman Empire, the world in which the Beatitudes were first preached, the richer and more powerful you were, the more valor and virtue you possessed, the closer you were to the emperor at the top of the social hierarchy, the more blessed you were, the more blessings you could seize for yourself, and the more blessings you could (if you chose to) bestow on those beneath you. . . . When Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," *he overturned the hierarchical structure of blessing*.

Jesus's blessings exalt God's value system and recognize human suffering. They promise a day when the hungry will be filled and the weeping will laugh.

But Luke doesn't stop with blessings. Unlike Matthew, who just lists "blesseds," Luke adds four "woes." If the blessings are blunt, the woes are jarring:

- Woe to you who are *rich*
- Woe to you who are *full*
- Woe to you who are *laughing*

- Woe to you when people *sing your praises*. . . that's just what people did to Israel's false prophets.

The Greek word translated here as “woe” could just as easily be “uh-oh” or even “yikes!” The point is, that you are missing out on what God's kingdom has in store. What you've got now—that's all you're going to get.

Chelsea Harmon writes beautifully about this, showing that even in the “woes,” Jesus is loving the enemies of the kingdom, because poverty, hunger, and sorrow . . .

“ . . . are not the only wounds Jesus wants to speak of as he stands among the great crowd. Those who do the hating and exclusion, those who make up lies about others and act revulsed are also in need of healing. They will be healed if they heed Jesus's woes.

For the rich who have literal wealth of unimaginable proportions and yet still fight to pay less...

For the full of themselves, who completely take up all the space wherever they are and expect others to treat them accordingly...

For those laughing at how successful they've been with their craftiness, coming up with new ways to skim off the top, steal from the masses, hide and hoard their gains...

For all of these, the promise is that right now is as 'good' as it will get for them. A Kingdom is coming that will not belong to them as long as they keep going the way they are going.

Only false prophets receive ubiquitous praise because only false prophets know how to play the game. But Jesus knows this isn't a game. This is his world that he loves deeply. So, he will bring an end to our greed that causes poverty and to all the wrong we do to one another because of our short-sighted love of the wrong things.”

This year, the contrast between Epiphany—the manifestation of God's dominion of love—and evil—the iron grip of hierarchical domination of power—has never seemed more obvious. We see it in Scripture and in the headlines.

It's been another trying week in our nation. We've seen efforts to take away the rights of the marginalized. In a country whose leadership is actively working to discriminate against those on the margins, we've seen children of ethnic minorities afraid to go to school for fear of deportation. We've seen fear keeping people from places of safety and community like our own Alley Shoppe, where no Spanish-speaking clients came shopping the week before last.

St. Thomas University down the road here lost 8 million in funding for educating special education teachers because the current presidential administration labeled them as "too focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion."¹

(Sidenote: Diversity is how God created the world; as a Christian organization, how could they not be focused on the diversity of the human community!)

We've seen cuts to those individuals and agencies whose job it is to protect from fraud and abuse.

And we've seen the richest man in the world refer to the poor as "parasites."²

I don't know about you, but I can feel helpless against such privilege, wealth, and power and the scapegoating, blaming, and discrimination against various vulnerable minority groups. Anna and I have written to our State Senators and representatives to speak out against this discrimination.³

But here's something we can do. I'm going to ask the Council to consider becoming a **Reconciling in Christ (RIC)** congregation.

Since 1983, the RIC program has helped Lutheran communities ensure the welcome, inclusion, celebration, and advocacy for people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions, and to work for racial equity and anti-racist commitments. This is one concrete way we can be about the work of God's kingdom, caring for those who are oppressed.

Jesus uses blessings to encourage and give hope to those who have every good reason to be discouraged and hopeless. Jesus says to the poor and oppressed: "The world doesn't see you, but I do."⁴

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¹<https://www.startribune.com/st-thomas-loses-grant-to-bolster-states-teacher-supply-after-trump-labels-it-a-dei-initiative/601221728>

² <https://bsky.app/profile/brucewilson.bsky.social/post/3li36riwroc2m>

³ We've used the website <https://democracy.io>. We also joined an Action Hour sponsored by [Indivisible Twin Cities](#).

⁴ Pr. Ed Horstman, "[I want to be surprised by God, even if that surprise might scare the bejesus out of me.](#)"

Back to needlepoint samplers... People stitch what matters to them. They stitch something meaningful. If it's a scripture, it reveals a faith commitment.

So, symbolically, what kind of work will we stitch?

What kind of commitment will we promote?

What kind of statement will we make with our lives and our church?

When our children and grandchildren look at our legacy, what will they see?

Will they see that we are here to bless those whom Jesus said are blessed:

the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the excluded?

May God grant us the courage and strength to do hard things as we follow his call.

And in doing so, we will be blessed.

Thanks be to God.