"Blessed"
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 2/1/26

"How did all those crowds of people hear Jesus without a microphone?" asked a participant in our Wednesday Bible study. If there was really a great crowd of hundreds or even thousands of people there to hear this sermon, how did Jesus project his voice? Bruce Whitehead noted that from a physics perspective, it would have made more sense for Jesus to sit at the bottom of the mountain rather than the top, because if he was at the bottom, the mountain would act as an amplifier for his voice. Emily then helpfully reminded me that that is precisely what the guides tell you when you travel to the place by the Sea of Galilee that local tradition remembers as the spot where Jesus gave his sermon: the guides tell you that despite Matthew's insistence that Jesus went *up* the mountain, he was more likely to be sitting at the bottom, with the crowds arrayed on the mountainside, creating a natural amphitheater.

Matthew is at pains in the early part of his gospel to show that Jesus is like Moses: Moses goes up the mountain to receive the law from God on behalf of God's people, so Matthew has Jesus going up the mountain to deliver his interpretation of the law, to help all the people who have gathered to hear him, to help them understand what it means to follow God's ways in their particular moment in history. We tend to hear Jesus's teachings as ahistorical and apolitical, but scholars believe that "many of the ethical passages of the Sermon on the Mount can be read as Jesus' intervention in a heated contemporary theological and political debate raging between the parties of his day."[1]

Though for his own theological reasons Matthew wants Jesus to be at the top of the mountain, for the aforementioned acoustical reasons Jesus was more likely sitting at the bottom of the mountain. And that would also give him the ability to see who was gathered to hear him, who made up this great crowd. I imagine Jesus pausing before he begins his speech, pausing to look around and notice all the people.

Some of those gathered to hear him were his fellow Galilleans, some had traveled a distance from population centers like Jerusalem, and some of them came even from areas beyond his own homeland, areas occupied not by his fellow Jews but by people of other cultures and other religions. Some of those gathered to hear Jesus were likely people he had already healed; many others were probably still in need of healing. And most of those gathered were suffering: suffering under the weight of Roman occupation of their land, subject to the whims of those who ruled over them, dependent on the emperor's favor for enough to eat, longing for the freedom of true self-determination. Suffering people.

I imagine Jesus pausing to look at this crowd, pausing to look up into their faces *and* into their hearts; I imagine Jesus pausing before he begins to interpret the law for them. And in this quiet moment of observation, of seeing – truly seeing the suffering etched across their faces, Jesus chooses not to begin his talk with admonishment or even instruction – but in this moment of seeing, he chooses to begin with blessing instead. To begin with blessing for this strangely diverse group of suffering people who have come to him longing for a good word.

You are blessed, Jesus begins. Those of you who are poor in spirit, who feel like you have nothing to look forward to, nothing to hope for: you are blessed. Those of you who are mourning loved ones lost to hunger or disease or state violence, those of you mourning your lack of resources, mourning for your nation: you are blessed. Those of you who are meek, who are humble, who feel powerless, who feel like there's nothing you can do to improve the situation of yourself or those around you: you are blessed. Those of you who long for justice as viscerally as a thirsty person longs for a drink of water: you are blessed. Those of you who have been put down for what you believe, who have been attacked for telling the truth: you are blessed.

Everyone who is hungry, hurting, oppressed, belittled, outcast, suffering, aching, laboring, striving for a better world: you are blessed. You are blessed. God sees you, Jesus says. God hears your cries. God knows your pain. And – good things are coming to you. Blessing is coming to you. Belonging is coming to you. Satisfaction is coming to you. Peace is coming to you. The very kingdom of heaven is coming to you. To you. Not to the powerful. Not to those who already have enough to keep them fat and happy. Not to the keepers of the status quo. To you. To all of you. Jesus looks out at the crowd of suffering people and says "I came for you."

I wonder what Jesus would say if he stood up in this pulpit and looked out into the faces of those of us gathered here? I wonder whose pain he would see, who he would offer a blessing to before he began. Blessed are you whose chemo

treatments have sapped your strength. Blessed are you who are mourning the loss of those nearest and dearest to you. Blessed are you who are in tender moments of transition, moments when your future seems to hang in the balance. Blessed are you wandering the lonely wilderness of depression, fighting back the relentlessly advancing forces of despair. Blessed are you who are so anxious about what's going on in our nation that you can't sleep at night. Blessed are you, Jesus says. I am there with you, Jesus says.

Now, for those of us who are lucky enough not to be in mourning, I don't think these words of Jesus are a call to make ourselves sad. Sometimes these Beatitudes, these blessings, are interpreted that way, interpreted to suggest that we should all be meek and mourning so that we too can be blessed by Jesus. I'm pretty sure that's not what Jesus meant. After all, joy is sacred too. Joy is a gift from God too. And goodness knows in these difficult days we need all the joy we can get. So please don't hear the Beatitudes as a call to be morose.

That said, there are certainly characteristics in Jesus's list of blessings that are less about being and more about doing – less about the situations in which we find ourselves and more about how we respond to what is going on around us. For example, blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy: whether we lead our lives with mercy as a core value, with mercy as the default response to what is going on around us – leading with mercy takes practice, but it is certainly something we can commit to, a way of being within our control. And blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled: hungering and thirsting for righteousness also takes some work – it takes a willingness to open ourselves to the stories of our neighbors, to hear the cries of those calling out for justice, a willingness to have our comfort challenged. But just like being merciful, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, for righteousness, to participate in God's work of putting things right – that is something we can strive toward. We can work on receiving that kind of blessing from God.

And blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus says, for they shall be called children of God. Blessed are the peacemakers. It's important to note that Jesus does not say blessed are the peacekeepers. Not blessed are those who would like to avoid change, not blessed are those who would like to keep things as they are because they are good for me, even if they are bad for someone else. No, Jesus says. Blessed are the peacemakers.

Being peacemakers is also a blessing we can strive toward. In this time in the life of the world, it may be the most important thing we can be doing together. What would it look like to be true peacemakers in our community right now? Not to be peacekeepers, protectors of the status quo that benefits the powerful, but true peacemakers, God's children, God's coworkers in bringing about the kingdom of God. A kingdom where all belong, where mercy is the rule rather than the exception, where all people are full, full not just with bread but with the kind of justice that brings true peace.

Preaching in 1934 with the Nazi movement gaining power, German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: "Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness and pride of power, and with its plea for the weak. Christians are doing too little to make these points clear, rather than too much. Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more, and take a stronger stand in favor of the weak, rather than considering first the possible right of the strong."

So in this quiet moment, let us imagine Jesus pausing before he sits down to preach to the American church, let's say; pausing to notice who is suffering, pausing to offer a blessing: blessed are the immigrants. Blessed are those who fear for their families, for their safety, for their very lives. Blessed are those trapped in detention centers without medical attention and without enough to eat. Blessed are the children separated from their parents. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

And blessed are the helpers putting themselves in harm's way to protect the vulnerable. Blessed are the churches collecting extra food to deliver to those who are afraid to leave their homes. Blessed are the people gathering in the streets to join their voices in a collective call for an end to state-sanctioned violence. And blessed are all of you, all of us, when we commit our lives to being peacemakers: doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God.