

The last time I went to the Holy Land, we went to what is called the Mount of Beatitudes in the Galilean hills, a place that marks approximately where Jesus would have likely preached and taught. There is a chapel, and gardens, and a couple of other buildings, overlooking the Sea of Galilee. When I went, it was peaceful, serene, even with dozens of Christian pilgrims. It was easy to get into a mindset of sentimentalizing or romanticizing the beatitudes as I took in the beauty of the space. But when Jesus climbed that same hillside and begins to teach, he was speaking into a neutral space, or from a place of sentimentality. He was standing in occupied territory. Galilee was under Roman control, and soldiers patrol the roads. Roman taxes crushed the poor. Roman crosses line the highways as a public warning not to rebel, to stay submissive and cooperative.

Jesus was preaching in the midst of empire, where empire values dominated. Blessed were the powerful, the strong, the wealthy. Blessed were those who knew their place in society and stayed there. I know you hear me talk about empire a whole lot, and you are probably getting tired of it – but the reason I do is because we have to resist the temptation to reduce the teachings and work of Jesus to instructions for personal piety. Jesus’ ministry has implications not only for us as individuals, but also has ramifications for how we live and move in a world that holds a very different value system.

So it is into that world that Jesus speaks: “Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the mourners. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the peacemakers.” These words sound sentimental. They sound pious and submissive. But these are not sweet, gentle words. They are subversive. They announce that God’s kingdom is breaking in, and it looks nothing like Rome.

In the Roman world, “blessed” meant favored by the gods. Blessed was a designation used for Emperors, generals, the wealthy, the powerful. You could see the ways in which the emperors, in particular, were designated as blessed. On money, you could see that Caesar was coined, “son of god.” (yes, that pun was intentional – you can groan or roll your eyes now). Inscriptions named him as “savior.” Imperial propaganda declared him “lord of peace.” Rome said: blessed are the strong, the conquerors, the winners.

But Jesus says, “No. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the grieving. Blessed are the gentle. Blessed are the persecuted.” Every single one of Jesus’ blessings contradicts imperial values. Jesus begins his sermon on the mount with a declaration of a different kind of kingdom.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and pastor living during the reign of the Third Reich, whom you’ve heard me talk about a lot, recognized this immediately.

He read the Beatitudes as words meant for people living under tyranny. He wrote that the Beatitudes describe those who live in “fellowship with the crucified,” those who stand where Jesus stands, in conflict with unjust power.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu heard them the same way under South African apartheid. He said: “The Beatitudes offer a transformative vision for humanity. They inspire us to be peacemakers, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, and to cultivate a deep sense of empathy and compassion for others.”

You see, under empire, empathy is seen as dangerous. Compassion threatens the power structures because it asks us to consider and alleviate the suffering of the most vulnerable, which always happens at the hands of those in power, whether through active and intentional efforts to maintain the status quo that keeps them on top, or at the very least through indifference. Justice is a disruptive force. Both of these men of God knew that to live as Beatitude people is to challenge systems that harm.

Rome was obsessed with status. There were clear social rankings: Citizens and non-citizens, free and enslaved, patricians and plebians. Worth was measured by power.

But Jesus says “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” God’s kingdom belongs to those with no status to defend. It doesn’t belong to the elites, it doesn’t belong to the religious gatekeepers, it doesn’t belong to the upwardly mobile. It belongs to those who have nothing. It belongs to those who recognize that they are utterly dependent upon God and upon one another. This was radical.

Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn.” Rome glorified victory and erased its victims. It celebrated conquest. There were no public rituals for conquered peoples or memorials to their suffering. There was no room for people to grieve what life once was. The act of mourning is an act of remembrance. It is a refusal to accept things as they are or pretend like everything is ok. In some ways, the act of mourning was to resist Roman propaganda that continually spouted the narrative that everything is better when Caesar has the power. Caesar knows best. Bonhoeffer called this “seeing reality clearly.” Tutu called it “truth-telling.” Empire depends on people forgetting any other reality. God’s kingdom depends on remembering.

Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek.” Rome worshiped force. The Pax Romana was based upon conquest and military domination. Meekness was NOT something to aspire to. To be gentle was to be weak. To refuse violence was to be foolish. It was anti-thetical to the ways of Rome. Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God belongs to those who reject domination. It’s a weaponless revolution.

Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness.” Rome’s economy ran on extraction – heavy taxation, seizure of land, trapping people in debt, reliance on slave labor. West Virginians know something about an economy run on extraction. Where Jesus was in Galilee, most people were poor and exploited. “Hungering for righteousness” meant longing for economic and social repair. It wasn’t just about personal morality, but justice. Equity. Archbishop Tutu recognized this. Bonhoeffer embodied it. Justice always threatens unjust systems.

Jesus says, “Blessed are the merciful.” Rome ruled through fear, and public spectacle was a significant way in which they did so. They used public whippings, executions, and collective punishment in order to get their message across. Mercy was seen as weakness. But Jesus says that God’s kingdom is built on restoration, not terror. This is why the cross was inevitable. Jesus, the merciful Messiah, cannot survive in a merciless system. God’s kingdom does not run on fear.

Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Rome bragged about “Pax Romana” – Roman peace. But it wasn’t true peace. It was peace enforced by swords. Peace through domination. Peace through conquest. Peace through fear. Jesus blesses peacemakers, not peace enforcers, or even “peace keepers.” Archbishop Tutu knew this as he chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in the aftermath of apartheid. He knew that peace required empathy, listening, and repair. Not silence or submission, not dominance or strong-arming.

Jesus says, “Blessed Are the Persecuted.” Jesus’ audience knew exactly what persecution meant. They had seen crosses, they had watched neighbors disappear. They had felt imperial pressure. But Jesus is honest: This way will cost you – if you choose to live in the ways of the kingdom, that means you are not living in the ways of Rome, and Rome will punish you for it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*: “When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die.” He did not mean this in a solely metaphorical sense. He recognized that it could also mean it literally. Tutu faced threats. Bonhoeffer faced execution. Jesus faced crucifixion. This is fellowship with the crucified.

The Beatitudes are not sentimental ideals, they are a path. Live this way and you will collide with the powers of the world. That is what happened to Jesus, that is what happened to Bonhoeffer, that is what happened to Tutu, and that is what happens still.

I think many of you know at this point that Bonhoeffer has long been a model and a teacher for me. I first learned of him when I was still in high school. I have appreciated and returned

to his writings again and again where he sought to figure out what faithfulness to Christ looked like under tyranny.

At the same time he was writing *The Cost of Discipleship* in Germany, a small, poor, Protestant village in southern France was quietly living it. The village was called Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. It sat high in the mountains. It was isolated, economically struggling, and overlooked. Its people were descendants of Huguenots, French Protestants who had once been hunted, imprisoned, and killed for their faith. They knew what it meant to be persecuted. They knew what it meant to hide. They knew what it meant to depend on God when the state turned against you.

At the center of this community were Pastor André Trocmé and his wife, Magda. When Hitler's regime spread into France and Jews began fleeing deportation and death camps, refugees started arriving in Le Chambon. They arrived hungry, traumatized, and terrified, often with nothing but the clothes they were wearing.

Some of the refugees knocked on doors in the middle of the night, begging for shelter, or any kind of help anyone was able to give. And the people of Le Chambon had a choice. They could protect themselves. They could say, "It's too dangerous, or "We have families." They could say, "We're just a small village," or "That's politics, not faith." Instead, André Trocmé stood in his pulpit and said these are people in great need, and we will help them. When later asked about aiding Jews, he famously said, "We do not know what a Jew is. We only know human beings."

Trocmé preached from Matthew 5 again and again and again. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. He told his congregation: "The duty of Christians is to resist violence without weapons." In other words, true resistance to the ways of the world was not with guns, or hatred, or revenge, but with hospitality, with courage, and with truth.

And the community responded as a Beatitude-shaped people. Families opened their homes. They hid people in attics and basements. They turned barns into shelters. They shared already-scarce food. They gave up beds to strangers. They taught refugee children in secret schools. Teenagers acted as guides, leading Jewish children through forests and mountain paths to safety in Switzerland. Farmers learned to forge ration cards. Shopkeepers learned to look the other way. Neighbors learned when not to ask questions. It became a whole network of mercy.

The Trocmés themselves housed refugees in their own home. They were questioned, threatened, arrested. At one point André was imprisoned in a detention camp. Even there, he preached. When officials asked him why he was doing this, he said: "The Gospel

requires it.” They were poor in spirit, knowing they were helpless without God. They mourned Europe’s suffering. They were meek, refusing violence. They hungered for righteousness. They were merciful. They made peace. They were persecuted. They lived every Beatitude. Magda Trocmé later said: “We were just doing what had to be done.”

That is fellowship with the crucified. They found Christ in frightened children. They demonstrated love of neighbor in forged documents, in answering midnight knocks, in whispered prayers. They chose proximity to suffering over proximity to power. And because they did, more than 3,000 people were saved – not through weapons, armies, or by a show of strength, but by a village shaped by Jesus. They were a people willing to follow Christ, living out compassion, even while recognizing the consequences. Jesus calls them blessed.

We are not living under Rome like Jesus and his followers were. But we do live under systems that echo those Roman values, values that emphasize domination, that protect the powerful, that punish dissent, that eschew empathy. We live in a time when faith is again being recruited by power.

And yet, even we see history, in many ways repeating itself, when it is tempting to despair, Bonhoeffer believed in resurrection from a prison cell. Tutu preached hope from funeral pulpits. And Jesus rose from an imperial execution. In our own moment, the way of Jesus continues to call the church into compassionate, Beatitude-shaped action.

In Minnesota as ICE activity has surged and as communities have re-experienced fear and violence, people of faith have not stood silently. Hundreds of clergy from across the country, Lutheran, United Methodist, Episcopal, Catholic, Jewish, and others, came to Minneapolis and the Twin Cities to stand with immigrant communities in prayer, witness, and protest. Some observed and documented immigration enforcement activities. Some were arrested alongside lay people while refusing to disperse in nonviolent civil witness. Many others continue to care for their immigrant neighbors by offering rides to work and medical appointments, hosting vigils and moments of lament, and building support networks of food, legal aid, and community accompaniment. In Christianity today, Elizabeth Berget wrote a piece worth reading about this network of mutual aid that has sprung up. In the face of fear and violence, and even death, faith communities have chosen presence and solidarity.

Here we see an example of the Beatitudes lived out in our time: They mourn with those who grieve their families being torn apart and lives being put at risk. They hunger for righteousness when they challenge policies that demean the dignity of our immigrant neighbors. They are merciful in offering care, shelter, and accompaniment to those

targeted by enforcement. They are peacemakers not by wielding power, but by *bearing witness* and building community where fear would divide.

Living the way of Jesus today often looks like showing up, naming suffering, and refusing to let fear shape our practice of faith. Ultimately, we are called to remember that while Empires rise and fall, God's kingdom remains.

So Jesus asks us today: Will we live as citizens of empire, or citizens of heaven? Will we choose comfort, or costly compassion? Will we seek proximity to power, or fellowship with the crucified? Will we inherit Rome's way, or Christ's way? Blessed are those who let the Beatitudes remake them. Blessed are those who stand where Jesus stands. Blessed are the ones who dare to live the kingdom in the shadow of empire. Amen.