There are fewer familiar passages in Scripture than what we just heard. The Beatitudes, we call them affectionally. Those “Blessed are you” statements from Jesus’ sermon. There are multiple versions of this sermon throughout Scripture. If you were to start trying to recite some of the Beatitudes from memory, You’d probably start quoting Matthew’s version in the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are the meek,” etc. etc. But today we get Luke’s version, which is called, “Sermon on the Plain.” Because Jesus came down from the mountain, and “stood on a level place” with his disciples and the huge crowds of people around him.

If I’m honest with you, I’d pick the Gospel of Matthew’s version of this text any day. Because what the writer Luke includes makes me so completely uncomfortable. “Blessed are you who are poor,” Luke says. Which is fine. Good, really. But of course as I hear Jesus say that, I know deep in my heart that doesn’t apply to me. And to make matters worse, Jesus reads my mind, and goes on, “woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” I just wish he didn’t have to say it out loud. Suddenly I’m getting the sinking feeling I’m not standing with Jesus.

It would okay if it ended there, but it doesn’t. Jesus goes on, in his world-turning, reality-shattering way, and says, “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” Uh oh. I’ve never known true hunger pains. And then he says, “Woe to you who are full.” Suddenly Jesus keeps getting smaller and smaller as I have the image of being at the back of this “great multitude of people” hearing the sermon, not the front.

My heart feels some relief when Jesus blesses those who weep, Because my goodness, any of us can weep. Grief is a leveling, unifying experience for humanity, and I feel myself a bit nearer.

But then he ends today with the words, “Woe to you when people speak well of you, when they flatter you…” The people-pleasers among us are in trouble, Because Jesus is not blessing the people pleasers today.
And then the passage for today is over.
And I feel much farther from Jesus than I did when he began.
I have to wonder, do you feel the same?

**Movement 2: Where you’re standing**
As I was discussing an earlier version of this sermon with one of our parishioners over email,
She asked me the question, “But what do you mean by ’blessed’?”
Ah yes. Good question.
What do I mean, but of course – what did Jesus mean.
“Blessed are you, blessed are you, blessed are you,” he says.

To answer this, I turned to one of my favorite spiritual teachers, the Jesuit priest Greg Boyle.
For those of you might not know Fr. Boyle,
He’s been doing ministry in L.A. for over thirty years,
Caring for gang members who are trying to get out of the cycle of violence.
In his book *Tattoos on the Heart* he wrestles with the iconic Beatitudes.
He wrote: "Scripture scholars contend that the original language of the Beatitudes should not be rendered as “Blessed are the single-hearted” or “Blessed are the peacemakers” or “Blessed are those who struggle for justice.”
Greater precision in translation would say, “You’re in the right place if . . . you are single-hearted or work for peace.”
The Beatitudes is not a spirituality, after all, Boyle said. It’s a geography.
It tells us where to stand.”

So then, hear Jesus’ words again:
“You’re standing in the right place if you’re poor, or if you’re with the poor.”
“You’re farther from me if you’re rich. But it won’t mean you can’t get to me, but come take a step closer.”
“You’re standing in the right place if you’re with the hungry. Come, let’s break bread together.”
“You’re standing in the right place if you’re weeping, because even I have wept over the death of my friends.”
“You’re standing in the right place if you have lost the popularity contest, but won the truth contest…if you risk your life and reputation to tell the truth for my sake.”

It’s our choice.
Jesus isn’t excluding us.
Jesus would never do that.
This is the person, who when he ran out of room in the house where he healed a paralytic, the people around him ripped the roof off to let more people in.
There’s plenty of space. Plenty of room.

We can be closer to Jesus.
It’s just a matter of location.

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1 Greg Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 75.
And Jesus has always chosen to stay closer to the weak, the vulnerable, the outcasts, the sinners, the poor, and the hungry.

This week I read another article by Greg Boyle that helped add some complexity to this interpretation. Boyle is reflecting on his decades in this ministry, and about a significant turning point that came for him around his sixth year. He said: “I had mistakenly tried to “save” young men and women trapped in gang life. But then, in an instant, I learned that saving lives is for the Coast Guard. Me wanting a gang member to have a different life would never be the same as that gang member wanting to have one.

**I discovered that you don’t go to the margins to rescue anyone.**

But if we go there, everyone finds rescue.”

We go to the margins of life – to where the poor and the hungry and the people stuck in violence are – not to save them, but to be in relationship with them. Not because they need us, but because we need them, And because that’s where Jesus is.

I think back to our conversation in forum with Jackie Acho last week about empathy. This is the essence of what it means to relate, to be empathetic:

When we connect with each other, truly, it changes us. We respond to the looks on each other’s faces, The stories we tell each other, And we’re connected. We begin to be changed, And we’ve entered the great dance of empathy that Jesus has called us into. We’re in relationship.

We may be comfortable here – I know I am. But the margins of Cleveland surround us on every side, and are among us. We’ll get to know some of our neighboring margins today at the forum. As you listen to the forum today, And as you let Jesus’ words confront you, I wonder what your answer will be to the question: “Where are you standing?” Are you at the margins, and are you ready to be changed? If not, let’s go together, because I need to get there too. That’s where we’ll find the risen One, who has come to meet us. The resurrected Christ who loves us too much to let us stay in the same place. Amen.

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2 https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/03/28/father-greg-boyle-i-thought-i-could-save-gang-members-i-was-wrong?fbclid=IwAR0FOSJKRJrxaEeYV1bjuJpUlfb4FBeK4xV9trhCRLxxcM414aAiAJh9Co