

November 1, All Saints A (Matthew 5:1-12)

Eight upside-down blessings for a pandemic world

by [Layton E. Williams](#) in the [October 21, 2020](#) issue

I'm not sure the world has ever felt as upside down in my lifetime as it has in 2020. A global pandemic and accompanying economic crisis, political division and discord, protests for justice and a better world for all people, and every week, it seems, a new catastrophe—a news story (or several) that causes us to roll our eyes and think, *Now this!*

A year ago, life included parties, happy hours, and travel. Its more mundane activities included public transit, workdays in the office, going to church, shopping for groceries, picking the kids up from school, and hugging people. That world is gone now. Every single one of these elements of “normal life” has been disrupted, destroyed, turned on its head. The world we inhabit now is strange, unfamiliar, and scary. We don't know what the future will hold or how long this season of upheaval and uncertainty will last.

Many times in recent months I have thought that the world is broken. Ending, even. That everything has become messed up. I have longed for the world I knew before. Despite its imperfections and injustices, it was a world that was largely comfortable for me.

The Beatitudes, however, are a reminder that the world as we have generally encountered it is not at all the world that God intends or desires for us. Indeed, in many ways God's desired world is an inversion of the world we expect and feel comfortable with and entitled to—particularly those of us who benefit from privilege.

With these eight strange and unexpected blessings, Jesus of Nazareth begins his epic Sermon on the Mount, throughout which he offers instruction, parable, promise, and command to his followers about the ways that God intends for us to live and the world God calls us to work toward. It's significant that Jesus begins here, with these

inverted blessings.

He begins by centering those who suffer, those who remain faithful in the face of hardship, those who focus themselves on compassion and care for others, on justice and righteousness, on making true peace for a better world for all. These are not the groups of people that our world tends to favor or exalt. In our dog-eat-dog world, the spoils go to the victor, the glory to the powerful. We celebrate those who are dominant, aggressive, and competitive. We reward those who prioritize themselves. Meanwhile, we avoid those who are suffering, we reject calls for justice and peace, and we see self-emptying concern for others as weakness.

Our misaligned and unholy priorities have been painfully and devastatingly evident over the course of this pandemic. As a result, we have a great many more names and lives to remember on this All Saints Day than we should.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus makes a promise: that regardless of how this world fails them, God's commonwealth or kin-dom will ultimately comfort and lift up those who are faithful and good. At the end, he speaks directly to his hearers, not only naming abstract groups but also reassuring those listening that if they also seek to be faithful and good, then no matter how the world mistreats them, God will ultimately be faithful to them.

I wonder about the inclusion of a direct appeal from Jesus in this passage. It turns the Beatitudes from a lecture into an invitation. What sort of person is being described by these blessings?

Those who mourn do so because they love someone who has been lost. Do we care enough about those who have died in this pandemic to mourn them? Will we care mercifully for those who are being hurt by this situation, whether in terms of health or finances or safety? Will we let ourselves feel the pangs of hunger at the persistence of unrighteousness? Will we do the hard work of making real and holy peace—instead of settling for the comfort of keeping a false peace that allows injustices in this world to continue?

In times of crisis, our impulse as mortal creatures is to shore up our defenses and do whatever it takes to keep ourselves alive. But God has created us not simply to be mortal but to be moral. Our call from God is to have a broader vision of care for all people. Those who do this, Jesus says, are blessed. Perhaps not in the world that we know—the one that props up powers and principalities, that celebrates individual

freedom over collective flourishing—but certainly in the kingdom of God.

Our world has been turned upside down, and that upending has meant immense suffering and struggle. I don't imagine any of us would identify a global pandemic as good, nor do I believe God would call it so. But while we have been shaken up, while we are in this space of upheaval, perhaps we can see our reality from a different vantage point. Perhaps we might lean into the discomfort of asking ourselves why we were so comfortable with the world as it was before. Why was that world in so many ways the inverse of the world Jesus illustrates in the Beatitudes, and was it ever right side up in God's eyes?

If this is the end of that world, what new and better world might we allow to begin?