Jesus invites us into a life where our assumptions and experiences are turned upside down. In the kingdom of God those who have great power are servants. In the kingdom of God those who have been humbled by the difficulties of life are lifted up, and those who have been lifted up as leaders must be humble. In the kingdom of God the blind beggar and the foreigners and the woman who is living with a man who is not her husband are the messengers of God’s love and power. Especially here, in the Gospel of Luke, the in breaking power of God brings a great reversal. God’s love and God’s justice will give strength to the weak and cast down the mighty from their thrones.

In this passage people are divided into two distinct groups, as if there is a broad center aisle that separates them forever: the rich and the poor, those who are full and those who are hungry, those who laugh and those who weep. We call this dualism.

This passage is one of the most memorable and one of the most perplexing passages in the New Testament. The Beatitudes, or blessings, is a favorite passage for many people and it is a troubling passage for many other people. So let’s take a few minutes to look into what is happening in the passage and what we might do in response.

First, let’s think about the dualism, the divisions between the people. The dualism comes from the way people treat each other. God creates each person with equal honor and equal love. It is easy to see each one of us is created in the image of God if you spend a lot of time around babies. The babies of people who didn’t graduate eighth grade are just as beautiful as the babies of people who are doctors and company presidents.

God doesn’t create us in two different categories. People create the dualism we see in the world. That was certainly the case in Jesus’ time.

In the passage Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. What did this great multitude of people look like? Most of them were poor. They were hungry.

We know this was true because in Jesus’ time and place the people were divided clearly into four castes or groups. There was a small group of very rich people at the top of the pyramid. This was the subject of the sermon last week. These people owned great plantations of land or they were wealthy traders. They didn’t really have to work. They lived in great luxury. In one passage of scripture we read how the wealthiest people slept on beds carved out of pure ivory. There weren’t too many elephants roaming the dry places of Judea so you know that ivory cost a small fortune.

The small group rich people hired managers to run their businesses and to oversee the work in their households. This was a slightly larger group of people. The managers were sort of like middle class people today, except there weren’t very many of them. They worked long days but they didn’t have to get their shoes or shirts dirty. They weren’t really rich but they were not poor. They had enough food to eat and comfortable beds to sleep on.

Underneath the managers was a very large group of people who did most of the work. They were the laborers. They planted the crops, and harvested the fruit, and washed the clothes, and dug the trenches. They didn’t always have enough to eat. They had a place to sleep, on the floor.

The largest group of all included those who were not able to work most of the time. They were extremely poor. Some of them were too old, some were too sick, some were too weak. Some were orphans. Some were widows with children. Some probably could have worked but they couldn’t find work. They rarely had enough to eat. They had many reasons to weep. And some of them didn’t have any place they could call their own to sleep.

Since most people were in these two bottom groups, the working poor and the destitute, and Jesus was speaking to a great multitude of people, we can assume that most of the people who were listening to his message were poor. But it was not Jesus who had divided the people into the poor and the rich.

The people had done that. Most of the blame lay with the rich people. The rich people created the stark division by making sure they had no contact with the poor. The rich people created the stark division by not sharing their wealth. But some of the poor people also no doubt contributed to the problem. They became thieves. Some were just as violent and dangerous as some of the rich people.
Like Isaiah last week, Jesus is simply describing the reality of the world people have created. People are the ones who create the divide between rich and poor. Dualism isn’t God’s way of doing things, most of the time it is our way of doing things.

The dualism of the world leads us to our second task, which is to consider the importance of unity for those who follow Jesus. God’s intention is for us to be united. Jesus prays that his disciples would be united as one. Jesus and St. Paul make a big deal about the necessity of working for unity, precisely because we are constantly dividing ourselves from each other.

We divide ourselves in every way imaginable. Some of it seems harmless. I like my group of friends whose life experience has been much like mine. Sometimes our divisions are more troubling. We turn up our noses at the other persons food, or their clothes or their music. And often our divisions are deadly. Our Sudanese members had to leave Sudan because the Muslims from the northern part of Sudan have been fighting the Christians from the southern part of Sudan for more than 50 years.

We even divide ourselves from one another within the church. We use the Bible as a weapon as we divide ourselves from each other. We do it on the left and on the right.

There are Christians who are wealthy and who seem to have not heard Jesus’ message of care for those who are poor. There are preachers who preach what we call a gospel of wealth and prosperity.

In their version of the good news, the good news is mostly for those who have it good. Those who have good homes and good cars and big, healthy families have been blessed by God. They must have done everything right for God to give them all of these things. Those who are poor or who are sick have been cursed by God. The wealth and prosperity preachers might not say it out loud but they will be happy to quote some passages from the Old Testament that indicate that the poor people and the sick people must have done something terrible for God to afflict them with poverty or disease.

On the other hand, there are Christians on the left who also seem like they haven’t heard Jesus’ message of love and unity for all people. A friend recalled that when she attended seminary some of her fellow seminarians looked down on her and derided her because she was wealthy enough to be able to pay full tuition. These future pastors were taking the words of the Gospel and using them to enforce the divisions that are deadly to us, divisions that wound the heart of God.

The message of Christ is not hatred or viciousness toward anyone. Christ gave us a new commandment to love one another. At the core of this message of love is care for the poor and for those in great need. Those who have wealth or power have a responsibility that is commensurate with their wealth and power to care for those in great need. The way of love is a way of unity, not division.

All of which leads us to a third level of consideration, our individual, practical responses to today’s Gospel. Let’s consider just two verses in greater detail.

_Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God._ For those who are poor this verse should bring hope. These are words about not giving up in the struggle against poverty, deprivation and emptiness. Those who are poor should strive to not be poor, strive to earn enough money and have food and shelter. With these words the poor are encouraged, not to stay poor but to move in the direction of the wealthy.

_But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation._ This ‘woe’ is a caution. Those who are rich must be careful. Have you ever noticed that some wealthy people use their wealth in a way that only brings pain and suffering to themselves and others? Jesus calls on wealthy people to move in the direction of the poor.

Wealthy followers of Jesus should be giving of their wealth to buy food and medicines for those who don’t have enough. They should be working to pass laws and create services to support those in need. They should be spending their time caring for those who are hungry or sick. They should be living and shopping and going to church with those who have little or no wealth. Those of us who are rich are called to move in the direction of the poor.

Unlike in Jesus’ time, most of us are neither rich, nor poor. Most of us have experienced some time in our lives when we haven’t had enough money to buy that next meal or pay the light bill. So, those of us in the middle need to move in both directions. Like the truly poor people we are striving to not be poor, by working, by not spending our money foolishly. Like the rich, those of us in the middle are called to serve those in greatest need.

So Jesus describes the world as it actually exists, the world of divisions we have created. Our calling is to move into the middle. Jesus calls us to move toward each other, to move into a place of unity, to move in the direction of God’s kingdom.