We desperately need some good news. We are in desperate need for God’s blessings to be upon our lives. In this passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus delivers surprising, good news to those who have been knocked down by life: God has blessings in store for you. Jesus says, Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Jesus’ message is startling to us; it goes against much of what we have experienced in life.

In a similarly surprising way, Jesus delivers a disturbing message to those who have some sort of wealth. Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. This doesn’t sound like good news to many of us.

It didn’t sound like good news to the author of the Gospel of Matthew, so Matthew softens the text by transposing Jesus’ words into a spiritual context. In Matthew’s account the first beatitude or blessing reads, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Yet there is something in this passage from the Gospel of Luke that makes it one of the most important passages of the Bible for us today. The divide between rich and poor in America has grown wider in the last several decades. Millions of our citizens piece together several part time jobs to pay for rent and other basic necessities. Here in Syracuse many of our neighborhoods have some of the highest poverty rates in the country. Jesus has put his finger on an issue which is a central concern for many of us: the injustice of income inequality.

So let’s take a deeper look at this message from three angles. First, let’s consider the message of the Beatitudes from the perspective of Jesus’ original audience for the Sermon on the Mount. Second, let’s consider the affects and implications of Jesus’ message of blessings and woes for us today. Finally, we’ll look a little deeper at the final paragraph, the portion of the sermon where Jesus’ tells us to love our enemies.

What was the meaning of Jesus’ message for those who first heard it? The message of the Beatitudes must have been even more surprising, more shocking for Jesus’ original audience than it is for us. The great multitudes of people were poor and the poverty of their lives was extreme. About half of the people in Judea were poor. Being poor meant not having a steady job or source of income, it meant not having enough to eat, it meant having just a few garments to wear. Being poor meant not having the opportunity to attend school.

In Jesus’ time being poor was almost always life-long condition. In Jesus’ time and place being poor meant there was almost no possibility of becoming successful; there was little possibility of working diligently and getting more education and a better job. Being poor was a condition of hunger, hopelessness and misery. In Jesus’ time being poor did not feel like a blessing, ever.

Which is why it was shocking for Jesus to say, Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. I wonder what the enormous crowd of people thought of this? Most of them were poor. I’m guessing most of them had never considered their poverty to be related in any way to being blessed by God. Perhaps that’s the reason Jesus’ second statement is more practical in nature: Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. This might have seemed like more of a possibility. Their hunger was a daily concern, and the idea of being filled, of having enough to eat, is easy to picture.

In a similar way, the rich people in Jesus’ time were extremely rich. Labor was extremely cheap, so rich people did not work. Rich people had slaves and servants. There were not very many rich people and they were treated very differently from everyone else. The rich walked alone, at the front of the line, with everyone else following behind them. Rich people were given seats of honor at every social occasion.

Which is why it was absurd for Jesus to say, Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. We can guess that there were no rich people in the great crowd of disciples who were following Jesus. But those who listened to the sermon on the mount remembered this part about the blessings and the woes. They retold this section about the blessings and woes to their friends and relatives. These ideas were strange. The great crowd of people had never heard anything like this before.

What did it mean to them? The Beatitudes conveyed a message of pure hope for Jesus’ original audience. They were poor. They were often hungry. There was a great deal of pain and suffering in their lives. Somehow they would be blessed by God. Jesus gave them a message of hope.

For us, Jesus’ message remains powerful in that we continue to experience extremes of poverty and wealth. But Jesus’ message in the Beatitudes is complicated by changes that have occurred since Jesus first preached these
verses. We live in a different time and place. Most of us are no longer surprised by these verses; we have heard them many times before. Our experiences of poverty and wealth and our community’s responses to poverty and wealth and are very different from what they were during Jesus’ time.

Consider the way Jesus clusters together the ideas of poverty, hunger and mourning in a way that makes them appear to be inextricably linked. These experiences may have come together, more or less as a package deal in Jesus’ time, but that is not always the case in our time. In the same way, the Beatitudes seems to imply that those who are laughing and those who have had their fill of good food must also be rich. Yet some of the best cooks I have known in my life were far from rich. In a similar way, those who are wealthy sometimes seem to be surprisingly poor when it comes to having a sense of humor. The connections between wealth and hunger and grief are complicated in our experience.

Most important of all, we live in a culture where a significant portion of the population is not at all surprised to hear Jesus’ message of blessings and curses. For many of us, including for many of you sitting here today, the Beatitudes and the entire Sermon on the Mount are the foundation of our approach to life. Our entire view of the world has been shaped by a lifelong encounter with the teachings and example of Christ.

So we have found tremendous power in Jesus’ message. Those who are suffering have a unique sort of access to the blessings that come from God. Conversely, those who are wealthy have reason to be concerned. Those who are secure in their earthly lives have to be especially attentive to seeking the kingdom of God.

As we celebrate All Saints Day many of us think back to the saints we have known in our lives. Whether they were rich or poor, all of them were especially attentive to seeking the kingdom of God. Some were members of St. Paul’s who made it their mission to serve those in greatest need in previous generations.

Thirty eight years ago members of St. Paul’s started a ministry to serve food to those who are hungry. Their efforts grew into an organization called the Samaritan Center. In 2019 the Samaritan Center is one of the most successful charitable organizations in the state. Hundreds of volunteers take turns serving 120,000 meals each year. The Samaritan Center has brought two types of blessings to our community. The first is that it in Syracuse, NY no one needs to be hungry. The second is that all sorts of people, poor and rich, the grieving and the laughing, have found the Samaritan Center to be a place of blessing.

All of this is our response to Jesus’ words. We have made Jesus’ message the wallpaper of our lives. Even many those who have not heard it directly have taken the main principles of Jesus’ message into their lives in a second-hand sort of way. Their parents or aunts or uncles or friends passed on an ethic of caring for the poor. Even when they are never spoken out loud, the Beatitudes are an all-pervasive ethic of life for many of us.

We have been changed by hearing the Beatitudes, over and over again. That is a very good thing. The world has been forever changed by Jesus’ teaching and witness. For most people today the shock or surprise comes when someone says something that is opposed to the Beatitudes. Think of someone who had never missed a meal in his life who might make light of the fact that others are hungry. That would be front page news for us. Think of a wealthy person who might ridicule someone who is suffering. That would be shocking.

We are still surprised, we are still flustered by Jesus’ teachings about loving our enemies at the end of today’s passage. Jesus says, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. These verses deserve a sermon all by themselves, but here are two ideas I would attach to any reading of this passage.

First, it is completely unacceptable for the weak to be attacked by the strong. These verses are not a justification for violence. I would never suggest to anyone that they should literally offer their body up to be abused by someone else.

Second, the idea of loving your enemies is powerfully effective in many situations. If you have never tried it, try praying for those who have abused you. If you have been hurt by someone else, try praying for them. I hope it will help them. I am confident praying for your enemies will help you be healed.

Jesus is pointing to a way of life we desperately need. I encourage you to immerse yourself in the community he has created. Pursue the blessings he has revealed. Make his message the wallpaper of your life.