

A Manifesto of Holy Resistance
Matthew 5:1-12
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
February 1, 2026
Rev. Dr. Mary Jane Hitt

A Lutheran clergy colleague, Mary Hinkle Shore, admits that she sometimes skips church on the Sunday when today's gospel lesson is read, because she can't stand to hear what she calls "the standard horrible sermon on the beatitudes." And I must say, that got my attention. I've sat through more than enough "horrible" sermons myself, and I'm pretty sure I've even preached a few. It's even possible – just sayin' – that I have stayed home a time or two rather than risk hearing yet another.

Professor Hinkle goes on to explain what she means by "horrible." It's the trite old sermon, she says, that turns the beatitudes into a recipe for earning yourself a blessing – a morality tale that tells you how to live if you want God to be pleased with you. "Be meek," that line of reasoning goes. "Hunger and thirst for righteousness. Endure persecution. Then God will be pleased with you. Then God will bless you. Then God will reward you with a good life."

Equally bad, I would say, are those messages that convert the beatitudes into the "be happy attitudes" Some years ago a popular television preacher wrote a book that did just that, turning each of Jesus' statements into a word of advice for living the good life. If you want to be happy, he says, then turn each of the eight beatitudes into a recipe for positive thinking. Admit that you need help; try to do the right thing; choose to be happy; and on it goes.

We miss the mark if we think of the beatitudes as a lesson in moral living or in pop psychology. We will be sorely disappointed if we hear Jesus' words this morning and leave this service determined to do better – to put on a happy face – so that God will bless us. Such a message would, indeed, be a "horrible" thing.

But what, then, are these beatitudes about? Let's take a look. These sayings of Jesus to his disciples and the gathered crowd are what scholars call "makarisms" because they each begin with the Greek word *Makarios*. This form of speech would have been familiar in Jesus' day, both in religious quarters and in the world at large. That formula took the shape "*Makarios* are the (blank), for they will (blank). For example, a makarism of the time might have gone like this:

Makarios are the rich, for they will never go hungry, or
Makarios are the healthy, for they will enjoy long life.

Most English Bibles translate the word "*makarios*" as "blessed", but that can be a bit confusing because of the way we typically use that word. Think about times you might say you were especially blessed. What comes to mind? A great job opportunity? A new baby? Falling in love with your partner? We typically think of blessings in terms of health and success and prosperity. We say we are blessed to have such good friends – such a great church; we say what a blessing it was that it didn't rain on the outdoor wedding; someone brings us soup when we're under the weather and we say, "You're such a blessing." We are blessed, we think, when things in our lives go well.

And so when Jesus began to speak that day, "*Makarios* are the . . ." his hearers may well have expected something along those lines – something positive – something

in line with the cultural values of the time. But he turned such expectations upside down. Instead of pronouncing that the rich or the healthy were *makarios*, he said something entirely unexpected. “*Makarios* are the poor in spirit; those who mourn; the meek. *Makarios* are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; the pure in heart; the peacemakers; those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. *Makarios* are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

In the Beatitudes, Jesus gives us a whole new lens for life – life from God’s point of view. God’s blessing comes to those without hope, he says – those without joy, those without favor. God’s blessing restores dignity and worth. God’s blessing says “I see you; I love you; I honor you; you matter.” Here as in so much of his teaching, Jesus proclaimed that the realm of God doesn’t operate like the power systems of the world. In the realm of God, those who are dispossessed and abandoned – those with no cause for hope – are honored. Those who mourn, not simply mourning those who have died, but also grieving the absence of justice and peace, are honored. Those with no cause for joy are honored. The meek – those who have been humiliated and downtrodden and denied access to the world’s resources – those who are unable to enjoy the creation God intends for all, are honored. Those who recognize that God’s will is not being done on earth and hunger and thirst for righteousness are honored.

And so too are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness as they work to set right what is wrong – as they strive to remove whatever gets in the way of life as God intends it to be. They live without pretense, with integrity, with a single-minded passion for justice. They work for the wholeness and well-being of our broken world, putting into action their desire for reconciliation and resisting all that stands in the way. Their commitment to justice does not fail when challenged. In bringing honor and blessing to the hopeless, they too receive God’s blessing.

Can you imagine how it must have felt to the gathered crowd that day to hear Jesus’ words? Can you imagine how folks who struggled, who mourned, who had given up hope received his words? When these folks heard Jesus say “*Makarios* are the poor in spirit”, they didn’t take his words as advice about how to live the good life or as pop psychology about how to be happy. What they heard was a description of how things are in the realm of God. What they heard was a promise that the way things have been is not the way things always will be. What they heard was words that reflected the reality of the world turned upside down, where “those who mourn are comforted rather than abandoned or pitied; where those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are satisfied, not ignored or shouted down, and where the meek inherit the earth rather than being ground into the dust.”¹ What they heard was that they were seen, and valued, and honored. They mattered. That’s what the world looks like when God answers our prayer, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.”

If we can imagine how the gathered crowd in Jesus’ day would have received this news, then what about people in our own time and place? What about people in the hollers of West Virginia who live without safe drinking water? What about our transgender siblings whose very identities are under attack? What about immigrants who are afraid to leave their homes for fear of arrest or worse? What about those who

¹ Mary Hinkle, *Pilgrim Preaching* weblog

can no longer afford health insurance and will suffer and die as a result? How might they receive Jesus' word of blessing and honor? And how might we offer that word? How might we act out our belief that all people are created in the image of God? How might we resist the principalities and powers that deny the dignity and worth of every person?

As recent events in Minneapolis and other cities under siege have shown us, and as our brown and black and Native siblings have always known, such resistance must be more than lip service. Jesus acknowledged that when he turned to his disciples and said, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad . . ." He didn't sugar coat it, and neither can we. Resistance to authoritarianism takes courage. It's risky to challenge tyrannical power. It's risky simply to be in the presence of such power. Renee Nicole Good. Alex Pretti. And so many others. But as Pastor Gusti pointed out last Sunday, we are not alone. Individually we may be little fish, but when come together we are a living organism. Where two or three are gathered together, there the divine spirit dwells, supporting us and guiding us and comforting us and empowering us. There is work to be done. God has called us each to bring honor to those the world shoves aside – to resist whatever gets in the way of wholeness for all people. Jesus did that when he engaged in non-violent, loving resistance. We who walk in his way and in his spirit can do no less.

Let the people say "Amen!"