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Families sometimes have traditions with the way they pray for certain events, such as at meals or family gatherings. I imagine you have certain traditions for prayer as well. Our family has a tradition of asking those who gather for a meal in our home to offer one or two words of thanks for a blessing their lives. Through the years I've heard folks say thanks for family, health, jobs, friends, and even a snow day to stay home from school.

I'm still waiting, however, for someone to say thanks for being poor, for crying and sadness, for meekness, for hunger and thirst, or for persecutions. Although these are things Matthew listed in today's gospel reading as blessed, I don't anticipate hearing gratitude for them. I wonder what Jesus had in mind when he spoke these words?

According to Matthew, Jesus spoke these words to a crowd on a mountain, words that many call the Sermon on the Mount. Commonly called the Beatitudes, which is the Latin word for "blessings," these words seem so counterintuitive. Thanks for

hunger? Thirst? And persecution? Come on Jesus, what did you have in mind?

Some readers may point out that Jesus said the poor in *spirit*, and those who hunger and thirst for *righteousness*, so maybe he didn't mean literally poor and hungry, just those who are spiritually seeking.

Luke, another writer who wrote about these words of Jesus, had a slightly different list and moved the event from a mountain to a level plain. In Luke's version Jesus blessed not the poor or hungry *in spirit*—but just those downright hungry and poor. Period.

If we look at Matthew's list a bit closer, we might discover three groups of people. The first group consists of those poor in spirit, the mourners, and the meek. One writer calls this the incapacitated group<sup>1</sup>—those in the midst of great loss and sorrow, those struggling with depression or anxiety, those caught in submissive or oppressed relationships. Jesus promised that they are

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blessed—that they will find salvation, be fortunate, be happy.

The second group includes those who long for righteousness, the merciful, and the pure in heart. They are very nice people who treat everyone fairly, but a writer suggests they are the passive ones, for they don't seek to make changes. Although they treat everyone well, they don't confront the powers of the world, for they're afraid of conflict. They want everyone to be nice, but they don't strive to confront the systems of injustice. Jesus suggests that they also will be blessed, that they can find happiness and salvation.

The third group includes the peacemakers, those persecuted for doing the right things and those falsely accused. These are the activists, the ones who stir things up and try to change the world, as one eleven-year-old girl named Sara illustrated when she wrote the following poem:

If it were all up to me  
The poor would have riches  
And the blind man would see  
The hungry would eat

And the weak would be strong  
And the people with hatred would all get along  
The ones who are greedy would start to share  
And unfriendly people would start to care  
The thirsty would drink  
And the deaf person hear  
And sorrow and sadness would all disappear  
And that is how the world would be  
If it were all up to me.<sup>2</sup>

People in this third group may find themselves scorned or imprisoned, for they go against the systems of power and often get in trouble by speaking up about the injustices they see. They speak out against racism. They confront those who abuse their spouses. They speak up on behalf of children who go to bed hungry. The Beatitudes reassure us they are also blessed by Jesus.

Although each group of people has such a different response to the world and a wide variety of circumstances, Jesus includes all of them in his promise of blessing, which means he includes all of us. Some of us get actively involved in changing the world by confronting injustice, some of us would rather avoid conflict but will offer prayers, and

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others feel too overwhelmed with personal life issues and loss. Jesus promises that we are all blessed, that salvation and happiness come to us all.

Jesus continued his Sermon on the Mount by addressing all three groups: You are the salt of the earth, and you are the light of the world. Whether you're an activist or timid or depressed, Jesus reminds all three groups of people that you have a mission of bringing tastiness and light to the world.

Imagine having a meal without any salt. The meal would be drab, less tasteful. Imagine a world without any light. We would stumble and bump into one another, and very little color would exist. Salt and light make the world livable, tasteful, beautiful. That's what Jesus says each one of us is like: we make the world a better place.

Korean Christians have a word that describes this same idea of being salt and light: *Jeong*. As writer Grace Ji-Sun Kim explains:

*Jeong* is a Korean term that permeates the lives of Koreans; it is part of what gives joy, attachment, and meaning to many people's

lives. *Jeong* is a difficult word to translate into English, but it can be understood, simply, as love. However, the term *jeong* includes affection, attachment, compassion, kindness, sharing, connection, and sympathy to people and even objects.

*Jeong* captures the essence of love and affection between people that is sticky and inseparable, like honey between our fingers. This sticky kind of love is difficult to untangle or separate oneself from, and thus makes us stay connected to one another. Even though you may argue or fight with your friend, spouse, or family member, *jeong* will bring you back together. The experience of *jeong* flows out of you to the other to cause connectedness, affection, and love.<sup>3</sup>

Being salt or light or *jeong* is not always an easy thing to do, is it? How many times have you pondered, *I just don't feel like making a difference today?* How many times have you thought, *Someone else will have to deal with those issues?* How many times have you felt that the challenges in your life prevent you from being salt or light or *jeong*?

Jesus' blessing in the Beatitudes reminds us that no matter what challenges you might face, God is

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bigger than any of them, as one young girl heard on a Sunday morning as she listened to the minister talking.

As the girl was riding home after church with her family, she turned to her mother and said, "Mommy, there's something about the preacher's message this morning that I don't understand."

The mother said, "Oh? What is it?"

The little girl replied, "Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. He said God is so big that He could hold the whole world in His hand. Is that true?"

The mother replied, "Yes, that's true, honey."

"But Mommy, he also said that God comes to live inside of us when we trust in Jesus. Is that true, too?"

Again, the mother assured the little girl that what the pastor had said was true. With a puzzled look on her face the little girl then asked, "If God is bigger than us and He lives in us, wouldn't He show through?"<sup>4</sup>

That's what the words of blessing from Jesus remind us—that God can show through us even in the most difficult of times. You are blessed salt and light and *jeong*. May you let God show through you.

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<sup>1</sup> Narrative Lectionary *Program 2 2018-19* Worship Resources, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> *Chicken Soup for the Preteen Soul*, 2000, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Grace Ji-Sun Kim, "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our 'Jeong,'" February 2019, <https://sojo.net/magazine/february-2019/they-ll-know-we-are-christians-our-jeong>

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Shirley, *When God Shows Through* as adapted from Homiletics Online.