

This is Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke's telling, Jesus preaches from a level place or a plain, so it's sometimes called the Sermon on the Plain. The Narrative Lectionary never includes it, I suppose because we get parts of the Sermon on the Mount during our Matthew year. But there are differences.

Most of the differences have to do with each writer's audience. Matthew writes for a Jewish audience. So he takes great pains to show the continuity between Jesus' teaching and the Torah – the law of Moses and the foundation stories.

Luke, writing to a mostly Gentile audience, doesn't do that as much. But much of it is nonetheless identical. And Luke's version is considerably shorter, so we'll actually read all of it in worship.

We'll cover it in two parts so the second part will be next week.

Before we actually get into Jesus' teachings in the sermon, notice that the first thing Jesus does is pray. Before he selects his inner circle, before he preaches his most famous sermon, he prays. Prayer is how we get situated in this mission...it's how we put ourselves in partnership with God. Strengthened and empowered by prayer, like Jesus, we are ready to jump in.

In the traditional church year, today is Christ the King Sunday, or the Reign of Christ Sunday. The narrative lectionary doesn't really observe Christ the King Sunday per se so it's not something we've really dealt with too much.

There are lots of images we have for Jesus – healer, friend, teacher, shepherd, savior, redeemer...and king. That title especially resonated with those early Jews who were waiting for a king from David's line to take David's throne. They didn't expect that king to rule the whole world instead of just Israel. And they didn't expect the king to actually be God.

We don't resonate generally with the idea of kings. Our country was founded on a rebellion against a king. And to be honest, most of us just want to be our own boss – we don't want a ruler.

And yet, the Bible does reveal Jesus as the one who sits at God's right hand...the one who rules heaven and earth.

It's an important role because it forces us to really consider whether Jesus does rule in our lives. And if not, who or what does?

Do you actually consider Jesus to be the authority in your life? Do you want the teachings of Jesus to shape your whole life?

It's a question Christians have to wrestle with in a time when much of what purports to be Christian is so very different from the teachings of Jesus. People talk about biblical values – but depending on what section and what era of the Bible you go with, that can offer up some very odd things.

This...this passage and all of the four gospels lay out Jesus' values and the values for God's realm.

We get pulled a lot of different directions. Jesus' teachings can seem very much at odds with some of what our culture values. Power, wealth, might, greatness, retribution. Some of what gets called Christianity seeks those values – power, wealth, might, greatness and retribution – over the values Jesus lays out in his teachings.

What is the authority for your life? What we do here in church doesn't make much sense at all if it isn't Jesus. Faith or belief in Christ may save us, if what you mean is going to heaven when you die. But that isn't mostly what Jesus meant.

Our faith doesn't mean a thing if it doesn't shape how we live or our values in the here and now. It's easy for people to say they love Jesus or they believe in Jesus or accept him as savior. It's harder to actually follow him. And that's what he's asking here.

Jesus is laying out a vision of the realm of God. He's laying out the values of that realm – a realm that has already started to unfold. We can live in it...or not.

As we read through the sermon, what were your reactions? If you felt yourself resisting some of it, where is that resistance coming from? What values lie behind that resistance? We all likely find ourselves resisting at least some of it. So we need to keep wrestling with those questions.

But in the meantime, if you're in, then buckle up and let's go.

The first part of the sermon will sound familiar. We call Matthew's version the Beatitudes. And just like in Matthew, Jesus starts off with some surprises. Those Jesus calls blessed are not those we would call blessed at all. It shakes us up and makes us take a closer look at those around us we might not consider blessed...the poor...the hungry...the sorrowful...the persecuted.

But it gets tougher. Luke goes on with the woes. Matthew doesn't have woes. This list also shakes us up. The woe category actually includes those who many would say are blessed.

The rich...the satisfied...the ones who can laugh when others are crying...the ones we respect and even revere.

This is what's often called the upside-down kingdom. It's a world where there aren't super rich and desperately poor. A world where those who society doesn't value have the same value as the people at the top. A world where non-violence is a way of life and retaliation is rejected.

To be honest, we don't really like the idea of Jesus handing out woes. But this is very close to the same thing those old testament prophets railed at. Rich people who don't care for the poor. People who scoff at those who are down and out. People who bask in the accolades of others.

With these words, Jesus is creating a realm – a kingdom. And in that kingdom, all thrive...not just the ones who can afford to. The woes should be heard as a prophet's warning to repent. It should also be heard as a warning to a community not just individuals. Ultimately the kingdom of God is going to be this beloved community of people living in harmony and peace with God and each other.

From the woes, it doesn't really get much easier. Love your enemies...turn the other cheek. And...be merciful just as God is merciful.

Mercy. That the rule of heaven and earth is established on the value of mercy creates a very different world from what earthly kings have often desired. Mercy can seem weak.

But if you've ever been faced with a choice between mercy and retaliation, you know that choosing mercy is anything but weak.

In God's kingdom the values Jesus lays out will reign...the values of love, mercy, non-violence, humility. There is a future component to this...Jesus is talking about the fulfillment of the kingdom at the end of all things. But he is also making it clear that these kingdom values are what his followers are to live by now. Jesus' followers are to live in the present on the basis of the values and practices of God's kingdom.

In the end, a merciful kingdom where love rules is what God is creating. A community following Jesus will be a community willing to lose those attributes and values that are not of the kingdom. To be refined or sifted like grain from chaff.

That's not easy. In fact it is a sort of death. In a world that tells you over and over that money and power and might and prestige are the way forward, mercy and love – including love for enemies – can seem lame. Or maybe just far-fetched.

The people listening to Jesus that day...especially those who committed to following him faced the same challenge. But as they walked with him...as they listened, asked questions, prayed and experienced life with Jesus, they changed.

It took time. It took having their own chaff burned off through their part in Jesus' death.

Jesus invites us on that same journey...to let him shape how we view the world...to live in a world that embraces mercy and love. He promises to make the journey with us. And he promises that the end result is worth dying for.