***Matthew 5:1–12:  Are you SURE that's a blessing?***

I don't know about you, but I've had enough of those endless television ads urging me to make the right choice. Do I choose based on their promises of wonderful benefits? Or do I choose the one who promises to save me from the disaster if I don't choose them? Is this a topic I should even mention in church? Yes, you guessed it.  I'm talking about Medicare open enrollment commercials—though the political ads fit the description, too! Make the right choice and I will be blessed with security and happiness – I will be living the good life.

Reading the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, I found myself thinking that Jesus could use a good advertising agency. Blessed are those who mourn? Those who are persecuted? That is a hard sell. It certainly isn't what we usually mean when we pray for someone to be blessed. Once again Jesus turns our expectations upside down. Follow him and we will be blessed – but not in ways we expect.

If we look at the original Hebrew, the word we translate as blessed is a word that means "happy, or fortunate, with a life that others wish they had,"  Put into modern language, this passage would sound more like "Those who are poor in spirit, who are picked on when they do good, who are mocked for living a Christian life, have happiness we should wish we also had, because they are living the good life."

The first Beatitude always gives me pause: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Poor in spirit? This spiritual poverty isn't just a "below middle income" sort of poverty – it means absolute spiritual destitution. It's how we feel, what we are, when we realize how our sins have put us completely at God's mercy. We cannot, through our own efforts, build up enough spiritual wealth to make us worthy of heaven – not through church attendance, prayer, or good deeds. Our sins will always outweigh our good intentions and deeds. Recognizing our spiritual poverty means we let go of the idea that God has some sort of scale to measure sin. As long as our sins weigh less than someone else's, well – maybe we are ok. Maybe we don't need God's help. In our poverty, we stop saying, "At least I'm not as bad as so-and-so," and begin saying, "God, I need your help." Happy indeed are we when we acknowledge our poverty.

With Jesus, we always have good news. Jesus says about the poor in spirit that the kingdom of heaven *is* theirs—not merely that it *will* be theirs someday. God is with us now. Through the Holy Spirit we are empowered to do his will. The empty spiritual bank account we bring to God is filled by grace.

Happy are we, who recognize that without God we are and have nothing, despite what we have that the world counts as blessings. We are to be envied indeed – not for our lifestyles, our health, or our bank accounts – but because thanks to the grace of God, he transforms our poverty into riches – the riches of being freed to open our hearts and hands to do his will. Thanks be to God for the blessing of his kingdom. Amen.