Blessings often surprise us, don’t they? As if we felt we didn’t deserve them or they were never really there to begin with or because the world confers an absurd list of standards and we’ve acquiesced to follow along. Blessings often surprise us because they point to something beyond us - a future glimpsed yet not seen - and it startles us that we would have to make sense of the now and not yet all at once. Blessings often surprise us because - it turns out - the Good News keeps being made new and alive every day.

Lauren and John were at the grocery store with their toddler son Mareto and baby daughter Arsema. John was pushing the grocery cart as fast as possible, Mareto on the verge of a meltdown. Lauren was running to the car with Arsema strapped to her chest in the carrier. Cereal bars were frantically being opened and sweat was pouring and then, Lauren heard someone yelling “Ma’am! Ma’am!”

She writes about how she slowed down, hoping and praying the woman wasn’t calling after her. She writes, “I stopped and turned to find a young woman rushing toward me. A bright smile covered her face, and I immediately noticed her beautiful black curls, just like the black curls snuggled on my chest, tickling my chin. Recognizing her shirt, I realized she worked there and assumed I must have dropped something. I looked at her, holding back my tears, waiting. ‘I just wanted you to have this bouquet…’ and I looked down to see the flowers in her hands. She quickly continued to explain...’I was adopted as a baby, and it has been a wonderful thing. We need more families like yours.’ I stared at her, stunned. Hadn’t she seen what a disaster we were in the store?”

“On a day when I felt like we were the worst example of family...a day when I hoped no one noticed us...she did. But she didn’t see what I assumed everyone was seeing. She didn’t think what I assumed
everyone was thinking. She saw beauty and love and hope and family. She thought we were wonderful and it made her smile.”

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up to the mountain and sat down. When he saw the people - the people others said were unworthy, powerless, poor, the good-for-nothing children and the useless women, the sick and left behind, the tormented, the anxious and hungry and thirsty - he saw them and instead of running away or turning around or calling only who the world called “worthy” to come near, Jesus sat down and stayed. That’s a sermon on the mount in and of itself. But then he opened his mouth which is how the surprise comes in.

Remember with me: Jesus belonged to a world where success was marked much like ours. If you had enough resources to be freed from oversight by soldiers and tax collectors - you had no criminal record and weren’t chased by bill collectors - you were respected. If you knew how to negotiate in the marketplace - how to keep a job and an investment portfolio - you were honored. If you provided for your family and owned a house - if you made enough to live above the poverty line - you were successful. We might add to our own list the number of degrees we’ve earned, the type of cars we drive, the access we have to our health care, the clothes we wear, the technology we buy, and - truthfully - the church we attend. Success carries its own set of standards, an ever-moving target that only those in the know seem to comprehend. So it was for the crowds Jesus saw, too.

I can’t help but think of Jesus smiling at the wonderful crowds that gathered around him, smiling like that grocery store clerk because what he saw was beauty and love and hope and family - his family. The family with whom he chose to shared the Good News with first. To inaugurate his teaching and break ground with the new world he was building, he took everything that the crowds had been told about themselves and flipped it upside down.

_Blessed are you - yes you - and you and you and you - you will inherit the earth and see God and be filled._

“I know,” he seems to say, “it appears to be otherwise. I understand - and that is precisely why I am beginning this way.”

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2 Matthew Myer Boulton, _Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1_.

Every week, we end our service with a charge that I’ve adapted from St. Teresa, a monastic who lived in Avila, Spain in the 16th century. I say, “you are the hands which bless all you meet,” because Christ has no body on earth now but yours. It turns out, the Good News can be made new and alive every day when we remember this. When we remember this story that began Jesus’ teaching ministry, when we remember how he saw the crowds and felt compelled to share and love and tell them that there is still a better way. When we remember that the crowds Jesus saw weren’t the only ones who needed blessings but each and everyone of us inside this building, outside this building, inside our circles, outside our circles, inside the status quo, never even bothered with the status quo - when we remember that the blessings Jesus gave out were abundant and perennial and without end because - it turns out - the world and all its people haven’t stopped trying to disquiet God’s order since the beginning and it takes a surprising and startling blessing to help us catch a glimpse of what the future will be in God’s reign.

We remember because we know we need it and if we need it...

Blessed are the ones who know what a hospital sounds like at 3am and blessed are those whose hands have held life and death in one shift. Blessed are those who know the discomfort of trying to sleep in a chair next to a loved one, only to find sleep elusive and spotted with blood draws and temperature checks. Blessed are those who bear news we never thought could be true and blessed are those who abide with a gentle presence rather than ceaseless advice. You will be called children of God.

Blessed are the ones who come into your sanctuary, O God, with not-so-quiet voices and paper airplanes and delightfully squeaky shoes and peppermints lining their pockets. Blessed are the ones who come with doubt and hesitation because “church” has never been more than a mixture of obligation, shame, and pain. Blessed are the ones who come with burdens heavy on their shoulders and blessed are the ones who scoot closer in because they know what it feels like. Blessed are the ones who know the fruit the comes when you stick around and blessed are the ones who come but for a morning because one day in your house is better than a thousand elsewhere. You will be called children of God.
Blessed are the ones who think they’re being left behind, ignored, forgotten and blessed are the ones who feel as if their country isn’t theirs anymore. Blessed are the ones who march in the streets and write letters and blessed are the ones who haven’t given up even if it is the same as it ever was. Blessed are those who commit themselves to justice and peace and blessed are those parents who send them on their way, knowing what distance is rendered in times of war. Blessed are the ones who hold fast to what is good and seek ye first the kingdom of God. You will be called children of God.

Blessed are the ones who make up our families of origin and our families of choice. Blessed are the ones who push our buttons and who call our bluffs and who are generous with us in a way that makes grace seem possible. Blessed are the ones who mourn for family who’ve joined the heavenly choir and blessed are the ones who mourn for family still living with whom what was will no longer be. Blessed are the ones who organize their parents’ papers and belongings and appointments and blessed is every person who showed up when we needed it because that’s what family - origin or not - does. You will be called children of God.

Blessed are the ones who call themselves friends and who can remind us that January always feels like this and that yes you are a good parent and no your dissertation isn’t boring. Blessed are those who answer our phone calls and blessed are those who make us howl with laughter. Blessed are those who make us feel safe and blessed are those who need every ounce of security and assurance available. Blessed are those who know only Christ as friend and blessed are those who make us feel seen and known and not alone. You will be called children of God.

Blessed are you, my loved ones. You will be - and are - called children of God. Surprising, isn’t it? May you live into this blessing knowing such is true and such is for you and - it turns out - so it is for everyone else, too. Thanks be to God, Amen.