

**Commentary on the lectionary for October 11 – November 1, 2020:
Sundays of Pentecost 19 – 21 and All Saints
By Dennis Ormseth for *Green Blades Rising*, October, 2020**

Preaching in the month of October in 2020 takes place as our nation begins voting in one of the most hotly contested elections in recent memory. Media commentators commonly describe what is at stake as the future of our democracy. Thus it seems important in this commentary focused on care of creation that we should ask after the significance of care of creation in the perspective of Christian faith for the future of the nation, and the weight which Christian voters should place on that concern as they make their choices. As we shall show in what follows, the readings for this month provide a solid basis for addressing such questions.

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 11

Psalm 23

Isaiah 25:1-9

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

The coupling of the parable of “The Wedding Banquet” from Matthew 22:1-14 with this Sunday’s first lesson from Isaiah 25 suggests that the parable must be understood as referring to the messianic banquet. With the reading of these texts together with Psalm 23, worship this Sunday invites the congregation to enter fully into the joy of the canticle of praise sung by Lutheran congregations at the opening of eucharistic worship:

“This is the feast of victory for our God.
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.
. . . .Sing with all the people of God,
and join in the hymn of all creation. . . .”

Those whose faith is coupled strongly with care of creation will be especially glad to celebrate the triumph of God in the life and work of Jesus the Servant of all Creation, in whose presence we gather. In the phrase of another opening canticle, “. . . *all of creation* sings for joy.”

There is, however, a fly in the chalice this morning, so to speak. For the last several years our denomination of Lutheranism has been grappling mightily with the challenge of gender and racial inclusivity, and recent events in American life have heightened our sensitivity to the issue as it concerns racial justice. Indeed, many pastors now welcome people to the table with an emphatic assurance that Jesus welcomes all, *without exception*, even. The “Parable of the Wedding Banquet” must give us pause concerning this practice, as it envisions a markedly less inclusive practice. The refusal of the invitation to the feast by a whole host of humans, coupled with the final exclusion of an inappropriately clad person recruited from the streets, might well shake our confidence in the inclusiveness of God’s victorious love. What, we might well ask, really counts for inclusion or exclusion in the great feast? Why is the proper wedding garment the critical factor, and what actually is this exclusion about? And is it then misguided to expect “all creation” to join in our song of praise?

In Bernard Brandon Scott's view, Matthew's version of this parable needs to be read in sequence with Matthew's earlier parables of "A Man had Two Sons" and "A Man Planted a Vineyard." In the progression of the three parables, he suggests, Matthew "sketches out his vision of the kingdom and its coming," which represents an "ideology of salvation history" and "concludes, on the one hand, that Israel has rejected God's messengers and, on the other, that the church's good fruits show forth that it is the true Israel." Perhaps Matthew simply wants to make clear, "as is most evident in his Great Judgment scene (Matt 25:31-46)," that "if grace calls, the threat of no fruits remains for judgment;" the presence of this ideology will serve as a foundation for frightful practices of prejudice and exclusion by churches down through the ages. Without a wedding garment, the man is "without the fruits of the kingdom, and thus subject to exclusion." (Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, pp. 162-63). Its a huge exception: as progeny of the Lutheran Reformation we know all too well the bitter fruit of the conflict over faith and works, not least in the recent struggles over issues of sexuality and race in American churches and the larger society.

Our interpretation of these parables supplants the exclusive ideology of salvation history with a theology of loving care of all creation. The point of the parable of "laborers in the vineyard" read three Sundays ago, we suggested, is that "God's generosity privileges the call to work in the vineyard over the wage paid, because work in the vineyard is the more essential blessing." God's call to work in the vineyard of creation is for all. God invites us to enter into "the noble activity of presenting to God a creation strengthened and restored through the exercise of our hands, heart and head." The invitation, writes Norman Wirzba, is "to join God in the divine work of cultivating and maintaining a garden (Gen. 2:8-9). It is to enter into the flow of the divine beneficence and hospitality" (Wirzba, *The Paradise of God*, pp. 155). Similarly, the parable of "A Man had Two Sons," while also subject to appropriation into the ideology of salvation history as the church comes to proclaim itself to be the "true Israel," can in our reading mean that the Son who actually goes to the vineyard and engages in its care is the true Servant of the creation. And finally, our reading of the awesomely violent parable of "A Man Planted a Vineyard" then further enlarges the scope of this line of interpretation by drawing on the primary vineyard texts of Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21:33-46 for an alternative development of the metaphor: those who reject the son reject their responsibility as caretakers of the vineyard. Their "ownership" of the vineyard has been all about privilege and power. The new tenants who replace them, on the other hand, are those who claim the heritage of the Son and join him in the work of restoring the creation.

Warren Carter makes a connection between our reading and today's Gospel feast this way: like the harvesting of good fruits, "feasting and eating indicate participation in God's purposes." The readings of Isaiah 25:1-9 and Psalm 23 serve to illustrate and underscore the point: the "meal also symbolizes the yet-future completion of God's purposes, when God's empire is established in full. Isaiah envisions God's future triumphant return to Zion, where God will make 'for all peoples a feast of rich food. . . . In the parable those who refuse to attend the wedding celebration are excluded, while those who come participate in God's purposes.'" As to the man who comes without a wedding garment, he fails "to discern and honor the authority and goodness of the king," and therefore consequentially suffers the worst imaginable consequences (Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, p. 434). Bernard Scott's treatment of this parable, which he renames "'What If No One Came?," provides a trio of related insights: the excuses given by the invited guests allude to a list of reasons that might be given for refusing to engage in holy war. Might they not have suspected that the feast was a celebration for another in the interminable line of conflicts in the quest for territorial domination, and wanted nothing whatsoever to do with it? Secondly, the victory feast strangely "never escalates to the expected

messianic banquet, because the master is powerless to attack those who have snubbed him.” And thirdly, the master “loses his upper-class status and must join those who live in the streets.” In contrast to the passage from Isaiah, in which “the poor and distressed receive new value from being associated with God,” in the parable the “householder cannot raise the poor up but must himself join them.” Perhaps this is the way the Servant of Creation would have originally told the parable. On the other hand, if Matthew later insisted on the necessity of vengeance to restore the king's honor, his point is well taken, too: in either case, it is God's passionately held will that we join with the Lord, the Servant of Creation, *all of us together, without exception*, in harvesting and celebrating the fruits of a restored creation! It's a thought that every Christian would do well to take with them into the voting booth this fall. As we will have occasion to suggest in our comment on the readings for next Sunday, it might well also serve as a cause that would bridge the many divisions that yet keep us from realizing a more perfect union in America.

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 18

Psalm 96:1-9 [10-13]

Isaiah 45:1-7

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's” (Matthew 22:21). With this saying of Jesus from this Sunday's gospel, we turn directly to the issues of Christian engagement in politics in general, and the politics of creation care particularly. Commentary on this saying of Jesus typically explains its meaning by proceeding to identify what belongs to the two contrasting categories, what belongs to the emperor and what to God, and then relates these to corresponding aspects of contemporary life. In a *New Proclamation* commentary on this Sunday's gospel, for example, Ralph Klein notes that the coin obviously belongs to the emperor, and “thus Jesus appears to support the state.” Thus, so should we: “Taxes are a part of the social contract that holds us together as a people, and they are a recognition that some social problem or public works are so immense that they can only be approached by all of us together working for the common good.” Voting, we would add, similarly belongs to a Christian's responsibility to the common good in our democracy.

What belongs to God, on the other hand? Kline appropriately notes that “the things that are God's are not identified specifically, and they may be interpreted in different ways by different interpreters”; he accordingly imports a suggestion from the next chapter of Matthew: its about “love of God and neighbor.” Or, more fulsomely, “one could argue that we, who are created in God's image and bear his image, ought to give ourselves back to God.” This opens up the possibilities dramatically: “All that we are and have comes from God and is entrusted to our stewardship. Our intellect, our energy, our compassion, our artistic abilities, and our money are gifts bestowed by God to enable us to use them for the greater good of all” (Ralph Klein, in *New Proclamation, Series A, 1999*, pp. 257-58.)

Klein's interpretation thus suggests a differentiation between a “common good” pertaining to civic engagement and the “greater good of all” of a relation to a Creator, a proposal far more complex than the typical understanding of the relationship in America of politics and religion. And it further suggests that our democracy is on either hand greatly endangered by our current politics. The New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman has recently noted that people really don't feel that the notion of the common good exists anymore. Our politics has broken the trust we have had in the institutions

such as science, news media, and the courts to “adjudicate what is right and true,” values belonging to a “sacred domain of decisions that will never be used to promote political gain,” so as to enable us “to define and pursue the common good” (“This is how democracies perish,” *New York Times*, October 2, 2020). And because belief in a Creator falters to the extent that care of creation has no genuine purchase on the convictions of either political party, not even the one with the more publicly claimed religious convictions, “the greater good of all” is likewise rendered a matter of merely transactional values to be manipulated for the acquisition of power.

The exchange between Jesus and his opponents, which does concern the relationship between the common good of the human economy, here represented by the economy of Rome, and the “greater common good” of what we might call the economy of God’s creation as it actually exists, is illuminated by considering the biblical background for Jesus’ response to his opponents. The lesson from Isaiah makes clear that God and the politics of empire are indeed inseparably mixed together. Cyrus the Persian is presented as the Lord’s “anointed,” “whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robe” (45:1). As Walter Brueggemann puts it, the rhetoric of this passage “reassigns a Davidic title to Cyrus, who now becomes the carrier of Israel’s most urgent hopes.” (For which reason, Donald Trump has implausibly seemed to some a modern Cyrus in giving sway to Israeli dominance in the Mideast conflict, an illustration of the transactional conversion of religious conviction we just described.) “Israel’s theological horizon now reaches well beyond itself, into the gentile world, in order to locate the continuing working of Yahweh’s saving intention.” (Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 517.) Strikingly, the first lesson reminds us that it was precisely in the context of this mixture of religion and the politics of empire that Israel developed what Walter Brueggemann regards as the “fullest articulation of creation faith”. Brueggemann explains:

In the context of exile, Israel faced a twofold crisis that invited Israel to despair and to abandonment of its confidence in Yahweh. The concrete ground for the despair is the formidable reality of Babylonian military-political power. Behind that visible authority, however is the legitimating power of the Babylonian gods who guaranteed the regime and who appear to be stronger than the counter power of Israel’s own God.

Hence, it is the “testimony to Yahweh’s work as Creator that counters the ostensive power of Babylon.” Yahweh serves Cyrus notice that Yahweh “is the only God who has demonstrated power as Creator, and therefore the other gods merit no obedience or deference” (Ibid., pp. 149-50.) As we have it in our lesson:

I am the Lord, and there is no other
I form light and create darkness
I make weal and create woe;
I the Lord do all these things.

Shower, O heavens, from above,
And let the skies rain down righteousness;
Let the earth open, that salvation may spring up,
And let it cause righteousness to sprout up also;
I the Lord have created it.

Isaiah 45:5-8; vs. 8, not in the assigned reading, is included here for its relevance to our argument: Just so, trust in God as precisely as the Creator of all things is key to the differentiation between the categories of good. What belongs to the Roman or any other emperor lies in the realm of good shared in common in the political realm, but beyond it, there is the all-encompassing realm of goods that are the gift of God. Thus also this Sunday Psalm 96 appropriately reminds us that our God is the creator of

all things, whom the heavens and all the earth join in praising: “let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth.” (Psalm 96:11-13.) What the emperors do in their realm is important, for sure, but far more significant is what the heavens and earth do – raining down righteousness and opening up for salvation so that righteousness can also sprout from the ground. The trees of the forest indeed have much to celebrate!

Jesus’ response to his opponent's challenge thus succeeds, not so much by separating “the things that belong to Caesar” and “the things that belong to God,” but rather, having differentiated between them, by nevertheless holding them together in a way that takes into account the relationship between the human economy and the divine economy of the creation. How does this understanding correlate to contemporary life? With regard to modern economies, Michael Northcott would have us differentiate between an abstractive, monetary model of economic activity and an ecological and theological one. Not to be dismissed as a mere rhetorical gesture, the coin that Jesus requests from his audience represents the nature of this economy. It's about the place of money in the civic realm of the common good. Northcott writes:

Money has the effect of disembedding human social life from naturally ordered space and time. It creates a new concept of space and time which is as abstract from the natural order of land and seasons, night and day, as digits in a computer database, but whose abstract power is exercised in a totalizing way over the lives of people for whom those digits are a debt incurred by their household or their government. By this abstractive force of money, power in human affairs is concentrated in the modern world in the hands of those who have the most money, typically large corporations, banks and institutional investors. The new mobility and concentration of social power as money dissolves traditional sources of authority and mechanisms for the shared exercise of power within moral constraints, as represented by tribal and family groups, by communities of place including villages and small towns and by religious communities (Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, p. 78).

The latter point is of crucial importance: in the perspective of modern ecology, Northcott argues, the money economy “operates regardless of natural ecological constraints because its measures of wealth and of exchange relations are abstracted from natural ecological systems.” At the same time, in theological perspective, which pertains to the realm of “the greater good of all,” “[m]oney displaces God as the ordering force or guiding spirit of modern relations of exchange and of modern culture.” (Ibid., pp. 79-80). “The disembedding of people from nature and community by the money economy and the industrialization of food, work and leisure also reflects and enhances the disembedding of human consciousness and community from the sacred cosmos.” (Ibid, p. 83)

What paying tribute to Rome meant in relationship to loyalty to God’s purposes, we are suggesting, participation in our modern economy means in relationship to belief in and care for God’s creation. A godless money economy has taken the place of Roman tribute, but the impact on communities of life is for all practical purposes much the same. Northcott describes the contemporary contrast between an economy that belongs to the modern imperial order and the economy of God this way:

‘The autonomy of money in the modern world is the social form of the denial of the creative and ordering activity of God in the world, and the shift from forms of human sociality oriented around the self-in-relation –to God, human communities and nature—towards atomized forms of human behavior, and the related tendency of modern states and markets to aggregate total human welfare in ways which frequently harm the welfare of particular human communities and individuals, and of the non-human world. The economy of God the creator/redeemer is by contrast an economy oriented . . . to the welfare of each *oikos* or household, where real economy, real wealth, is measured in terms of the realization by each household of those goods which make for human flourishing, including sociability, play and religion. Economic relations on this account should reflect the relational character of created order, and the relational character of the self, which as we have seen, are both grounded in the Hebrew and Christian traditions on a relational account of the being of God. (Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, pp. 298-99.)

Jesus’ response to his opponents resists the Roman form of this economic dislocation, and by extension, its modern form as well. Jesus, Carter argues, “has demonstrated this loyalty in the journey to Jerusalem, in his healing (21:150 and teaching (21:23-22:46).” We would add: and in his consistent loyalty as the Lord, the Servant of all Creation, to God’s purpose of care for creation. Jesus’ saying suggests that the imperial money economy we serve with such loyalty needs to be subsumed under the divine economy of creation. To give to the emperor *only* those things that are the emperor’s is to recognize the limited value of our “godless” money system as a means to building and distributing wealth; and to give to God all “the things that belong to God” is to reorient this system to the righteousness of the God who is indeed Creator of both heaven and earth, from whom all things are, and to whom all things, both human and nonhuman, both on earth and in heaven, belong. We shall explore more fully the nature of this second category of response in the commentary on the readings for next Sunday.

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, October 25, 2020

Psalm 1

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it; ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Matthew 22: 37-39.

Picking up on last Sunday’s consideration of the differentiation of Caesar’s economy from the realm of divinely sanctioned good, these words of Jesus leave no confusion or doubt at all about what belongs to God. Coming as it does at the end of a block of narrative in which the conflict between Jesus and his opponents over his mission and his authority is brought to the fever pitch that leads to his death, this saying, the so-called ‘double commandment to love,’ constitutes something of an epitome of both Jesus’ teaching and his practice. Citing both Moses and the holiness code from Leviticus, Jesus demonstrates his loyalty to the faith of Israel and thus silences his critics. And for us, those words again provide an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of care of creation in his mission. We focused on the second half of the saying, concerning love of neighbor, in our comment on the texts for

the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (linked to *Green Blades Rising* for September). With reference to Paul's ethical counsel in Romans 13:9-10, we asked, "Can one imagine that one could love a neighbor, doing the neighbor no wrong, as Paul specifies, without also caring for the 'hood' in which the neighbor lives?" "Care for the neighborhood as an essential aspect of love of neighbor," we urged, "encompasses all aspects of the web of relationships, natural no less than social, economic, and political." We refer the reader to that discussion, and turn to what happens to be the more important and decisive matter of the first half of the saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all our soul, and with all your mind."

In a discussion of the biblical meaning of love, Michael Welker makes the key points needed here. "If we take the time to compare the numerous statements about love in the biblical traditions," he writes, "we are first struck by the multitude of 'relations' that cause them to speak of 'love.'" Contrary to what he regards in contemporary discussions of love as "captivity of thought" to a "paradigmatic concentration on the affective person-to-person relation," Welker argues that "[a]part from the great variety of 'love relations' in the biblical traditions it is striking that for centuries the love of God is strictly connected to the respect for and 'attention to the commandments' or to the 'holding fast to God's word. Correspondingly, 'to love God's name' and 'to serve God' (Isaiah 56:6) can be connected. . . . The 'love of God'. . . quite obviously also means to take up and pursue God's intentions as they pertain to the good order and the well-being of creation in general." Love of God, he urges with specific reference to the saying of Matthew 22:37,

"includes, and even opens up, law-abiding and loving relationships to the world, to fellow human beings, and even to other fellow creatures, according to God's intentions. The so-called double commandment of love" should thus not be regarded as a combination of two different basic relations, but as a strict connection that says something important about the biblical understanding of love in general. (Welker, "Romantic Love, Covenantal Love, Kenotic Love," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, John Polkinghorn, ed., pp. 130-31.)

The "love God loves with and wants to be loved with" is both revealed in Jesus and made available to us through him as a power with which we, too, can love the creation.

Love in this perspective takes two forms, covenantal love and kenotic love. Both are of crucial significance for the care of creation. The covenantal form of love, Welker stipulates,

bestows a great dignity on human beings. They are dignified to take up and pursue God's intentions in relation to creation, God's interests in the well being of creation. They are dignified to reveal God's will and God's plans for creation. And they are dignified to work toward the fulfillment of the divine creative, sustaining, and transforming agency. No less is expressed in the notion of the *imago Dei*" (*Ibid.*, p. 133.)

But given the great "weight of love" thus conferred on human being --"For who could claim that he or she could respond to this calling and take care of God's intentions for the creation? Who could claim to participate in God's strength and being?" (*Ibid.*) --, God also "unconditionally turns to creatures in order to liberate them out of the depths of confusion, lostness, and sin, to win them for the coming reign of God, and to ennoble them to the experience and enactment of God's love, something they can

only experience and enact as a new creation.” In this kenotic form of love, God reveals God’s own “burning passion for creatures” in themselves, and “not just for their suitability to the divine plan for the world.” This love involves “a passionate interest in the otherness of the other, a passionate interest in letting the other unfold himself-herself in freedom, a passionate interest to pave ways for the unfolding of his-or-her life, all are characteristic of kenotic love.” Not just a matter of curiosity, this love

seeks to win the other for a new life in a new creation. The kenotic love of God seeks a *new* covenantal relationship –without boundaries, without exclusion, but with the divine purpose to win the beloved one for participation in the divine life and in the divine plans for creation. The life of Christ offers guidance to help us become familiar with these plans” (Ibid., p. 134).

With this assertion we profoundly agree. We can sum up our understanding of the “plan” as follows: if love of neighborhood is inherent in love of neighbor, so also is love of God’s creation inherent in love of God. To love God is to honor God’s work of love, the whole creation and the earth which is the God-given source of all life. It is to love what God loves, with the love with which God wants it to be loved, the love which is ours in and through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the love of that which is other than our selves and in its own being worthy of being loved, worthy of its place within web of creation. This love can be exercised most directly and effectively in relationship to one’s neighbor and the ‘hood’ that we and our neighbors share. But for the human species as a whole and a Church catholic that would be genuinely inclusive of all, there is no limit in all Creation as to the object of such love. Surely it belongs to the practice of every Christian individual and every congregation to enfold the surrounding community in that love, and so show that this is truly what Christian faith is about.

All Saints Sunday, Nov.1, 2020

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

Revelation 7:9-17

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

“Is heaven for pelicans?” asks Christopher Southgate, in his provocative discussion of “Eschatological Considerations” in his *The Groaning of Creation* (p. 78ff.) A literalist’ reading of the seventh chapter of the Book of the Revelation to John might answer, “no, only lions, oxen, humans and eagles.” The images here are, of course, the mythical “six winged” cherubim. Though clearly angelic, they nonetheless represent humankind and all the animals created by God (cf. Genesis 1:20-27), perhaps as ‘they existed in God’s mind from all eternity,’ to adopt the suggestion of a footnote to the text of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (4: 9-11; see the footnotes to Rev. 4:6-11 in NOAB, P. 369NT). Strikingly, these creatures are all “full of eyes all around and inside;” they are made for seeing the glory of God and giving God praise. Ever watchful, they lead the elders in praise of the one who sits upon the throne, singing “you are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”

For what reason do these four creatures join in the praise of angels and elders before the throne of God? Because they see that the God who has brought all things into being has now brought the saints out of “the great ordeal” of death in the old creation. The lament from Psalm 34 reminds us of what existence

there was like. Then the humble lived in constant fear and shame (v.4-5). Even “young lions suffer want and hunger,” typifying the human view of wild animals as enemies and their habitat in the wilderness as threat (See the interpretation in *The Green Psalter: Resources for an Ecological Spirituality*, pp.44-47). Contrast this imagery with the situation in the new creation: sheltered by the shepherd upon the throne “they will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat.” The Lamb “will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” All alienation between creatures having been overcome in the community of creation gathered around the throne, they now bow down together in worship of their Creator. Or, to respond as the author of 1 John might, they behold those who are now revealed to be children of God, and are therefore “like God, for they see God as God is.” Drawing insight from Chapter 8 of the Letter to the Romans, they rejoice to see those for whom “the creation waits with eager longing” in “hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (8:19-21).” Or, to turn to yet another relevant text, the Gospel for this Day, they welcome the arrival of those who have followed the way which Jesus, the Servant of Creation, set out for his followers in his Sermon on the Mount. All those present around the throne, “the great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”, together with angels, elders and the four living creatures worship God – a truly unconditionally inclusive gathering, at last!--- are creaturely witnesses, in the words of their hymn of praise, to the salvation of the creation by the God “seated on the throne and to the Lamb!”

It is the last of these suggestions that we need to develop here, since the Gospel reading is from the Sermon on the Mount. Warren Carter, whose exegesis of the Sermon we follow here (*Matthew and the Margins*, pp. 130 –37), proposes that the beatitudes concern “primarily God’s favor for certain human actions and situations (Ps 1:1-2).” Beatitudes, he writes, “are directed to the present and future ages.” The nine blessings of the Sermon identify and affirm certain situations and actions as signs of the coming of God’s reign, present or future. They “reassure those who already experience the circumstances or manifest the particular behavior that God’s favor is or will be on them.” They are, we might say, specifications of that sacred “greater good” which because it belongs to the love of God cannot be monetized and bargained away in relation to anything in creation. While they concern the full range of human concern, our focus is on the ways the actions and situations so favored are of particular benefit to all creation.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus begins. The “poor in spirit,” argues Carter, “are those who are economically poor and whose spirits or being are crushed by economic injustice. They can see no hope, but they know the corrosive effect of hopeless poverty. They are described in several psalms as oppressed by the wicked” (p. 131). The issue here is the overcoming of a totally negative expectation regarding the fulfillment of the promise of well-being, which from time to time dominates the spirit of an individual or a community. This is a condition experienced by people who, as Carter puts it, are “without resources and hope, subject to larger forces that seem beyond reach,” but also by their advocates that the powerful in an oppressive political arena refuse to hear. It is not uncommonly the experience in our culture of people who care passionately about Earth and its non-human inhabitants. Their advocacy on behalf of the ‘non-human other’ seems so futile, because the lives of the creatures that are the focus of their concern and love are threatened so totally, and the powerful appear so completely indifferent to their fate, maintaining policies that are completely driven by their own self-interest. A judgment expressed by Carter fits both oppressed humans and dominated nature equally well: “Denied justice, adequate resources, wholeness, and subject to the power of the ruling elite, there is no hope of change. Unless God intervenes” (p. 132). But God *will* intervene, Jesus promises: The

poor in spirit are blessed because the kingdom of heaven *is theirs*. The fulfillment of the promise given with their creation is guaranteed to come to them, in the eschaton if not sooner. The point of the first beatitude bears emphasis by repetition, Carter thinks: “The declaration that the hopeless poor are blessed (see 5:3) because God is in the process of liberating them, is so startling that it is repeated. Blessed are those who mourn.” Yes, they are blessed precisely because they mourn “the destructive impact of imperial powers. . . . Oppression is not normative. It should be mourned.” Their mourning is in fact sign of the enduring vitality of their spirit, however diminished in strength it might be.

With respect to the first two beatitudes, then, the blessings are relevant to non-human creatures by virtue of the impact on them of the circumstances and behaviors of human beings. With the next several beatitudes, on the other hand, the application is rather more direct. Jesus continues: “Blessed are the meek,” those who give place to others and thus show appropriate respect for their need of that place for their existence. Theirs is an implicitly profound ecological behavior, and so the blessing is appropriate: “they shall inherit the earth.” As Carter insists, “this is not to be spiritualized. God, not the meek, will overthrow the elite so that all may use the earth (Ps 37:10-11).” But neither is this to be limited anthropocentrically. “The present inequitable access to land, based on exploitative societal relationships will end. The earth and its resources belong to God (Gen 1; Ps 24:1). As stewards, humans are to nurture it (Gen 1:28-31) as a basis for a community in which all have access to necessary resources . . . Earth, then, refers not only to the land of Israel but to all of God’s creation” (p. 133.)

So also, accordingly, those “who hunger and thirst for righteousness”—understood here as existence characterized by right relationships, including adequate resources for living (besides space, water, energy, sustenance)—“will be filled.” And, we would add, *fulfilled*: “for those who show mercy will receive mercy,” not just from God, but reciprocally in a community of practical and active love. The “pure in heart,” humans whose external actions must be consistent with internal commitments and motivations, but also non-humans whose external life conforms to the purposes God has instilled in their very nature—they will all together “see God,” again a promise that necessarily points to an eschatological fulfillment that is open to all creatures. And, finally, the peacemakers: certainly not the peace of the Roman Empire’s “order, security, and prosperity,” nor the peace of the American empire with its exhaustive quest to secure resources that now extends out into the cosmos beyond Earth. Rather, the reference is to *God’s* “cosmic peace in which all things are in just relation with each other and their creator.” Called children of God, the identity of peacemakers is shaped by neither ethnicity nor species-being, and emphatically not by virtue of their power to dominate over others, but rather by conformity to the pattern of both God and Jesus, self-giving love.

The final two beatitudes return to the struggle identified in the first two, that of confronting the opposition, with “its commitments, power structures, and beneficiaries,” mounted against the just and reconciling way of life envisioned in his beatitudes: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (5:10-11). What does it mean that God looks with favor on those who give up their lives in the struggle for right relationships? Their reward is “the kingdom of heaven.” They will participate in the completion of God’s purposes, enjoying the fullness of God’s presence and empire,” Carter insists (p. 136). On All Saints Sunday, all God’s creatures, both in heaven and on earth, have reason indeed to give heartfelt thanks and praise.