

Global Mission Sunday

SERMON — February 1, 2026

The Rev. Dr. Larry Kochendorfer – ELCIC National Bishop

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany — Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, 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."

-Matthew 5:1-12

Dear church,

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Today, the first Sunday in February, is our ELCIC's Global Mission Sunday, an opportunity to lift up our partner churches, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, the United Evangelical Lutheran Church – Argentina and Uruguay, and the Lutheran Church of Peru, as well as the companion, synod to church, relationships.

For this sermon I am leaning heavily, and often word for word, on the writing of Debie Thomas. She is someone I bumped into, someone I discovered quite accidentally and quite providentially three years ago. Debie Thomas is an author, theologian, poet, preacher's kid born in South India, raised in Boston, Massachusetts, and who was at that time a seminarian in Berkley, California.

Her first book, "Into the Mess & Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ," is a remarkable collection of essays on the stories of Jesus. Each is an invitation to faith in all its complexity and untidiness. The Jesus who emerges is not the sanitized Christ of piety and platitude, but the Christ of complicated joys and transcendent sorrows. The Christ who weeps, wonders, loses, learns, and seeks. These are the stories of the Incarnate God who finds and loves us in the messiness of our lives.

As Debie Thomas writes of the beatitudes, she first identifies what they are not: not Hallmark greeting cards, nor a “to do” list, nor permission slips for passivity, instead, they are blessings, reversals, and vocation.

Blessings, reversals, vocation.

The beatitudes are blessings. I know that this may sound obvious, but stay with me here, as these are the first words Jesus offers those who follow him, in fact the first words this Gospel records from Jesus’s first sermon, his first teaching. And they are words of blessing.

Blessing comes first. Not judgment. Not terms and conditions. Blessing, not penance.

Jesus begins his ministry by telling the disciples who and what they already are: they are blessed. Blessed, fortunate, favored. Why? Because they are near and dear to God’s heart. This is their identity, without condition or measure. They are freely blessed, and so they are freed to bless others.

You are blessed, dear church, dear siblings, you are near and dear to God’s heart; blessed, freed to bless others.

What would happen, I wonder, if we who profess faith in Jesus sought to follow his example, by setting as our first priority to bless others as we have been blessed? To lead with blessing? To live from a posture of blessing? To make blessing our most visible and foundational gift to those around us? What would happen to our hearts, to the Church, to the world, if we offered blessings to our neighbours as generously as God offers blessing to us?

In the ELCIC we are saying it this way: we are living out God’s grace and unconditional love.

What might this mean on this Global Mission Sunday as we consider our partnerships with the Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, in Argentina and Uruguay, and in Peru?

Praying, yes, for the leadership and for the ministries, but also intentionally learning about the churches and ministries and contexts in Jordan and the Holy Land, in Argentina and Uruguay, and in Peru, and accompanying one another guided by the relational values of mutuality, inclusivity, vulnerability, sustainability, and empowerment.

Living from a posture of blessing – living out God’s grace and unconditional love – would also mean considering financial support as individuals, families, congregations for the ministries we have been invited to support.

I give thanks to God for your generous response in 2025 to our ELCIC and Eastern Synod Appeal to support the ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. Together, across

the church, we met our goal of raising \$50,000 to assist in supporting this vital work that embodies faith, resilience and hope of a just peace. Thank you for your generosity, for your blessing.

Living from a posture of blessing might include additional financial support for tuition scholarships for students attending Lutheran schools in Jordan and the Holy Land whose families cannot afford the fees. A blessing which transforms lives and families and communities.

Or it might mean living out God's grace and unconditional love by supporting ministry in Argentina and Uruguay, where together we are supporting the educational work of the church for those most often disadvantaged and marginalized.

Or supporting the ministry of Pastor Yoli in Peru, who leads a program in the congregation to support children in the surrounding neighbourhood. The congregation offers a lunch program and tutoring three days of the week, assisting the children to stay in school, strengthening their chances for a better future. In a place of great need, it's a way of showing love.

The Beatitudes are blessings.

The Beatitudes are also reversals. Jesus describes a universe turned on its head. A world where the usual might-makes-right, survival-of-the-fittest hierarchies, rules, and priorities just plain don't apply.

The kin-dom Jesus bears witness to in the Beatitudes is God's unwavering proximity to pain, suffering, sorrow, and loss. God is nearest to those who are lowly, oppressed, marginalized, unwanted, and broken. God isn't obsessed with the powerful or the impressive; God is too busy sticking close to what's messy, chaotic, unruly, and unattractive.

God is always close to the destitute, the anguished, the lost, and the confused. God faithfully accompanies those who go days, weeks, months, and years, hungry for a sign, a word, a crumb, a drop. Our hunger is not indicative of God's absence. Our hunger is the sign we seek.

The Beatitudes challenge me to look carefully at my own life. To consider where and how my privilege keeps me from seeking God. To know that I have something to learn about following Jesus that my privileged life circumstances will not teach me; something to grasp about the freedom of the Christian life that I will never grasp until God becomes my all, my starting place, and my ending place; something to gain from the humility that says, these brothers and sisters, these siblings in Christ in Peru, Argentina and Uruguay, in Jordan and the Holy Land, have everything to teach me.

The Beatitudes are a blessing. The Beatitudes are a reversal.

And the Beatitudes are a vocation. We make a grave mistake if we separate Jesus's words from his actions, if we seek to interpret his teachings through any filter other than the filter of his own life and ministry. Yes, Jesus pronounces blessings on the meek, the hungry, the impoverished, and the oppressed. But

what does he do before and after this pronouncement? He empowers the meek, he feeds the hungry, he cares for the poor, and he demands justice for the oppressed.

Which is to say, Jesus acts. He doesn't simply speak blessing. He lives it. He embodies it. He incarnates it. Through his words, his hands, his feet, his life, he brings about the very blessings he promises.

I experienced the Beatitudes as vocation in El Salvador. The Beatitudes as action, blessing lived, embodied. It was a Saturday evening. We were late for worship at Apostles of Christ Lutheran Church in San Salvador. It was our first evening in El Salvador and we had been invited to worship to celebrate three baptisms.

We were late. The sanctuary was filled and overflowing. The hot, humid, stagnant air left me wondering if I would be able to breathe.

Clergy couple, Norma and Rafael, were gracious hosts...welcoming us...motioning for us to come and to sit in the front where seats were hastily moved into place.

Three children were to be baptized at the worship. Three children dressed in spotless white. I wasn't sure if they were from one family or from three families, and I noticed, even before the baptism, that the man holding a little infant boy was very emotional...he was crying... weeping...struggling it seemed to hold himself together.

As the infant was baptized...as water was poured over his head and the Word was spoken...the father's tears flowed unstopped...freely...running down his face.

I was incredibly moved.

This is an unusual scene in El Salvador...a man...crying...and like Moses who could not turn away from the burning bush which was not consumed I couldn't turn my eyes away from this man.

After the worship an elderly woman came and took the baby from him. She had a bottle of milk and she carried the freshly baptized infant outside and sat down next to the dirt road and fed him the milk.

Others came to the man and gave him bag after bag filled with what looked like diapers, bottles, food, and some clothing.

I stumbled over to someone who could translate for me and asked Pastor Norma about this man and this boy. He was crying she said because his wife had died in labor. He was crying, she said, for the love of his wife. He was crying she said because he could not afford to care for his son.

And the community surrounded him and his son. They were providing for them. Caring for them.

The Beatitudes as action, blessing lived, embodied. The Beatitudes as vocation.

Blessed are you, dear church. Blessed are you. So now, go, on this Global Mission Sunday. Become what you are, give away what you seek, bless what God blesses, and turn this world on its head. Rejoice and be glad. The One who blesses you and every child, and all creation, is near.

Live out God's grace and unconditional love.

PRAYER: (adapted from The Rev. Susan R. Briehl. Day 1, April 30, 2000.)

Holy God, come among us, in the good news proclaimed, in water and Word, present in loaf and cup, and in the company of others who seek to follow Jesus.

Send us, filled with the breath of your Holy Spirit,
To breathe peace into fearful lives,
To love one another as we have been loved,
To welcome the stranger and make friends of enemies,
To forgive the sins that bind others to the past,
To serve, on bended knee, all in need of care,
To be your wounded and risen Body in the world
And to enter with joy your in-breaking, startling future. Amen

I acknowledge that I rely heavily, and often word for word from: Debie Thomas, *"The Blessing and the Bite," Into the Mess & Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ*, Cascade Books, ©Debie Thomas 2022.