January 29, Epiphany 4A (*Matthew 5:1-12)*

Luke's Beatitudes are for the poor. What if Matthew's are, too?

by [Alma Tinoco Ruiz](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue

Years ago I taught a preaching course at Duke Divinity School's Iniciativa de Predicación Hispana-Latina, a program that provides theological and ministerial training in Spanish. In one class, we read Matthew's Beatitudes alongside Luke's. My students noticed the differences. They highlighted Matthew's emphasis on spiritual poverty and hunger for justice, contrasting this with Luke's claim that Jesus blesses those experiencing material poverty and physical hunger. They also noticed that Luke includes a condemnation of the rich and compares the rich with false prophets. Most of them, especially those who had experienced poverty, preferred Luke's version. They felt that Luke was talking to them.

Matthew's version can come off as an affirmation of Christians like the young rich man who is willing to keep God's commandments of not murdering, not committing adultery, not stealing, not bearing false witness, and honoring his father and mother—but is not willing to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor (Matt. 19:16–22). Meanwhile, Luke's version affirms what later came to be called God's preferential option for the poor.

But what if Matthew's Beatitudes are intended for the poor, too? What if this text is an act of resistance to oppression, a message of liberation for the poor rather than confirmation for the rich?

On Christmas Eve 1979, Óscar Romero preached a homily called "The Birth of the Lord," taking Matthew 16:24–25 as his text. "There is no redemption without the cross," he said,

> but that does not mean our poor people should be passive. We wrongly indoctrinated the poor when we told them, "It is God's will for you to live poor and hopeless on the margins of society." That is not true! God in no

way wants social injustice, and whenever it exists, God judges it as the great sin of the oppressors.

Romero acknowledged that the church has been complicit in the oppression of the poor. Furthermore, he helped poor, oppressed, and marginalized people reframe their stories by reminding them of their worth as human beings and as children of God. In the same homily, Romero said,

God is telling the poor, as he told the oppressed Christ while he was carrying his cross, "You will save the world by making your suffering a protest of salvation and by not conforming to what God does not want. You will save the world if you die in your poverty while yearning for better times, making your whole life a prayer, and embodying everything that seeks to liberate the people from this situation."

Romero encouraged the poor to discern the things that could be changed in their lives and society—and to participate in this change by continuing Jesus' mission on earth, a nonviolent resistance.

So I wonder if Matthew's version of the Beatitudes could be more liberative than we typically imagine. Perhaps Matthew, like Romero, is telling the poor, *You do not have to be materially poor to enter into the kingdom of God. God does not want you to be poor. Blessed are you who fight for righteousness, who are persecuted for fighting against exploitation.* I wonder if Matthew aims to empower poor, oppressed, and marginalized people by helping them see their worth and God's will for their lives.

This is what pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey describes as the empowerment model of pastoral care. This model was inspired particularly by the work of Brazilian philosopher of education Paulo Freire. Pastoral caregivers who work with this model "seek to assist in the 'conscientization' of the oppressed and marginalized through enabling them to ask questions about their life situation," writes Lartey. Through the process of conscientization, people become more aware of their situation and the resources they possess to respond to things and change them.

Matthew's version of the Beatitudes could be an effort to help poor people gain conscientization of their situation and become active participants in changing it.