Matthew and Luke’s versions of what we have come to call, respectively, the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain, based on the geographical context provided in each, have some significant differences.

Before going further I should tell you that the following background material comes from the Reverend Dennis Bratcher’s blog, “The Voice.” And full disclosure: I found the link to that on our own Bishop Andy Doyle’s blog, “Hitchhiking the Word.”

Back to Matthew and Luke: Matthew’s overarching concern was for his fellow Jewish Christians, thus, the Jewish elements in the early Church. He takes care to parallel Jesus’ proclamation of the beatitudes with Moses’ presentation of the Torah, the Law. Moses had revealed the Torah, the Law, on tablets of stone from Mount Sinai, which he had ascended to encounter God in the burning bush. He has Jesus speak from a mountain to present the New Law—“it has been said, but I say . . .” to underscore Jesus’ role as lawgiver, the new Moses.

Luke also includes mountain scenes as part of his description of Jesus’ life to be sure—he prays and communes with God on the mountain, for example. However, here he has Jesus come down to a level place to meet the common people on their own ground. It’s a reflection of the Incarnation itself, God coming into the world as a human to meet other humans. Luke is less concerned with establishing Jesus’ authority as a lawgiver than as a teacher showing his brothers and sisters how to apply the implications of the kingdom of God in daily life. This is a central element of Luke’s gospel.

The scene in Luke takes place in a great crowd of disciples. In the preceding verses Jesus has appointed the twelve apostles. Here, they are included in this great multitude. There are people from Tyre and Sidon present also, almost certainly named as such to let us know that there were Gentiles as well as Jews in the mix. So, there are three groups: the twelve, the larger crowds of followers of Jesus, and this mixture of Jews and Gentiles not yet committed to following Jesus. This is the audience, or the congregation, present.

Luke carefully places Jesus’ words in the context of his actions with mentions of healings that have already taken place. These actions, in Luke’s scheme, give authority to Jesus’ words.

Matthew’s version presents nine blessings.

Luke’s has four blessings, and they are carefully ranged against four woes, or curses.

poor – rich

hungry – full

those who weep – those who laugh

those who are hated – those who are well thought of

While Matthew overtly spiritualizes the blessings, such as the “poor in spirit” and those who “hunger for righteousness,” Luke is concerned for social justice and equity, and has Jesus speak in literal terms—real poverty, real, hunger, real weeping, real hatred.

In Bratcher’s words, better than those I could have assembled myself, “Poverty, hunger, weeping, and hatred are not something to seek. But they are more fertile ground for receiving the kingdom. And they are a likely result of following Jesus.”

In other words, Jesus is telling them about the cost of discipleship as well as the eternal benefits.

More Bratcher: “While the disciples are not called prophets here, and are assigned no prophetic role, Luke seems to be drawing an analogy between the OT prophets who spoke the truth and the disciples who will live the truth . . . The point is that truth, in whatever form it is presented, is not welcome in a world that is governed by self-interest, and whos values are decided by the right and satisfied who have need of nothing. There is a subversive element to the truth and the only recourse people have is to silence it by hatred, exclusion, vilification, and defamation.”

His crowning comment, in my opinion, is this: “In the end, the blessings cannot be sought as ends in themselves and do not come by effort. They are simply the way things are in the kingdom that has now come in Jesus. If we accept that as truth, what remains is only to live in that truth (v. 46) and let it transform us.”

It seems to me that this whole scene is also the culmination of Jeremiah’s wonderful image of the tree planted by water, echoed in Psalm 1. The tree takes no credit for its good fortune. It merely seeks the essential life force flowing in the stream by its side. This image of a stream alongside the tree aptly describes Jesus’ relationship with his hearers, and with us, alongside us in our human lives as one who knows that life from the inside out.

We do best when we recognize that we live by grace, regardless of the circumstances of our lives at any given moment.

We are called to live gratefully as children of the Creator of all that is and ever has been and ever will be. Or, in the words of our collect:

“O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you . . . give us the help of your grace, that . . . we may please you both in will and deed . . . *Amen.*”