

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany - A (2026)

Micah 6:1-8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

‘When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them....’ In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Today’s reading from Mathew’s gospel serves as the prologue to what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. The complete discourse covers chapters 5-7 and includes familiar topics such as the believer’s response to anger, lust, divorce, loving our enemies, and the Lord’s Prayer, to name only a few. These opening verses, known as the Beatitudes, are exceedingly well-known by Christians and non-Christians alike. They represent a vision of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, or if you prefer, the reign of God, that cannot be fully achieved during our earthly pilgrimage, but provide for us the hope that believers can trust and affirm as we live through the ups and downs, the defeats and victories, and the joy and sorrows in the here and now. As believers, the ways of God that are depicted in the Beatitudes give us the power to live with one foot in this world and one in the kingdom. The Beatitudes are not something we ‘accomplish.’ Rather, we strive to live into them in the day-to-day realities of our lives. These ‘rules of the God’s reign’ portray a way of living that is diametrically different from that of the world and set before us promises of God that, as we embrace them, open up to us the very coming nearness of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. For whenever a person chooses the ways of God, the kingdom comes near.

As I said, the Beatitudes open for us the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is one of five discourses of Jesus found in Matthew’s gospel. Scholars generally agree that the Sermon is a collection of sayings and teachings rather than a sermon delivered in one setting, if for no other reason than the sheer length of the discourse would be very difficult to absorb in one sitting. We will have two selections of this extended teaching over the next two Sundays, where Jesus

instructs his disciples about the importance of being Salt and Light and the dangers of Anger that take us up to the season of Lent.

So where do we begin? How about at the beginning? Jesus begins each of the eight Beatitudes with the notion of 'blessed.' The Greek word for blessed is *makarios*. But what does 'blessed' really mean? I found the most straightforward answer is being the beneficiary of God's unmerited favor or provision, an extension of his grace. It is not so much about how many of us use the word or phrase, "I am blessed," as a way of indicating a sense of good fortune or experiencing a desired outcome. Not that these can't be blessings, but in the context of the Beatitudes, I think the idea of 'blessed' connotes a sense of understanding God's providence in our lives, blessings which we cannot provide for ourselves, and for which we are to express our gratitude to him, especially those who consider themselves believers.

Did you notice that these eight Beatitudes are based in the present moment? Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, blessed *are* those who mourn, blessed *are* the meek, etc. These blessings are for us now, not couched as something *only* to be experienced in the future. In addition, one of my study resources suggested that "the first four beatitudes (poor in spirit, mourn, meek, and hunger and thirst for righteousness) describe the heart of the person who is rightly related to God. The remaining (merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and the persecuted) describe how such a person relates to other people." This makes sense as we live into the call of Jesus to love God and our neighbor. And one final piece of background I found interesting is that Jesus, amidst all the crowds of onlookers, curiosity seekers, and the truly interested, took to the mountain to begin his teaching. Mountains are continually referenced in the scriptures and are places where one encounters God: think of Moses on Mt. Sinai, or Abraham being called to sacrifice his son Isaac, or when Jesus invites Peter, James, and John to experience the Transfiguration. How many of us have experienced a riveting 'mountain top' encounter that we can only describe as what the mystics call the 'thin place,' the moment where the distance between earth and heaven collapses and the sense of the divine becomes 'real?'

Blessed, favored, are those who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. In other words, blessed are those who are not full of themselves, who know they need God's help; who find themselves with no hope, for that is when they know that only God can fill the void.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who know how to cry and feel for the hurts of others. Blessed are those who, upon thinking they've lost everything important to them, embrace the God of all mercies and compassion.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Meek does not mean weak or timid. My old pastor friend told me that meek was being angry at the right time for the right reason. Jesus was not meek when he overturned the tables of the money changers. Moses was not meek when he demanded that Pharaoh release the Hebrews. Meek speaks to an internal sense of humility, when you are content with who and what you are.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are those who come to understand that the ways of God provide the nourishment of the soul that the world cannot. To hunger and thirst for the things of God compel us to do what is right, honorable, and loving, that seeks the well-being of others.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. We are to be merciful, to demonstrate compassion, patience, kindness, and judgment. As we extend mercy to others, Scripture tells us that it comes back to us in greater amounts.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. To be pure of heart is to let go of all that corrupts our thinking and behavior, like anger, jealousy, greed, and arrogance. Being pure of heart focuses one's attention on God; they are not double-minded. Being pure of heart shapes how we understand and operate in the world and opens ourselves to the very presence of God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. As followers of the Prince of Peace, let us follow in his ways through cooperation, not inappropriate competition. As peacemakers, let us not add to the already corrupt and dehumanizing ways of treating others but foster paths of reconciliation.

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. Stand up and speak the truth as instructed by the Holy Spirit; speak and act in ways that are of God, knowing beforehand that the world will hate it. You will not only be in good company, but the persecution will drive you more deeply into the love and protection of God.

Dear friends, we see the disconnect between the ways of the Beatitudes and those of the world. The world's values are built upon power, wealth, success, being in the correct group, prestige, being 'right', and having all things secure in one's life. That is not how Jesus calls us to live. The Beatitudes reflect ways of living that build up, not tear down; that bring healing, not exploitation; that offer deep peace, not phony, self-serving hypocrisy; that inspire true wholeness or shalom, not peace at someone else's expense. There is work to do in bringing the kingdom near. For as the prophet Micah implored the people of his time, he speaks to us today: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." May it begin with us this very day.

