

**February 1, 2026**

**Sermon Text                      Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSVue)**

**1** When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. **2** And he began to speak and taught them, saying:  
**3** “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
**4** “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
**5** “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
**6** “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.  
**7** “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
**8** “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
**9** “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.  
**10** “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
**11** “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. **12** Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

**SERMON    “Leaving They and Becoming We”**

Blessed. We say prayers of thanksgiving, for the things we have in life that we know in our hearts are a gift from God: the beauty of the area we live in; the food we eat, having enough water to sustain our living; the people that walk alongside us in daily living. But when we hear we are blessed, we should also hear the responsibility that is placed on us. If we’re blessed, it’s with the responsibility to be a blessing to others.

As we start coming to the end of the season of Epiphany, we continue to think about the illumination this time of year brings, the light Jesus shines on who God is, and what God expects of us. But, the blessing of light also reveals what is hidden in darkness that illumination reveals, the crevices that have accumulated dirt and grime that can only be cleaned out when we see, in the brighter light, what has been hidden.

Today’s lectionary passages from Micah and The Gospel of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount can provide comfort and hope in many instances in our lives. But they are also a light, illuminating God’s expectations and God’s will for us. Normally, our Mountain Movers would be with us in the entire worship service on communion Sundays. But after discussion with Beth, I have followed

the Spirit's guidance to have them introduced to the Beatitudes at a child's level. What's hidden in darkness can be scary, but as children they need the opportunity to explore the Beatitudes in a developmentally appropriate way, to see themselves as beloved children of God, and thus with the responsibility to love God and neighbor in return.

So today we speak as adults, brought into the Christian faith by many pathways, to seek the bright light Jesus shines on our darkest inclinations.

The prophet Micah's words in chapter 6 have been often used as engravings on the buildings that house centers of law and justice. They're beautiful words used even by those that don't label themselves as religious Christians. And in ancient Israel, they were preached in a context of a courtroom. At the time of this prophetic message from Micah, Israel was facing an existential moment. The feared Assyrians were gathering at their borders. Of all of the nations that conquered and subjected the nation of Israel, Assyria may have been the most blood thirsty. So the people of Israel were running to their priests and prophets, clamoring for an answer on how to protect themselves. The Israelites challenged the pending loss of their blessings, land/food/loved ones, and begged Micah to tell them what they could do to convince God to intervene, to save them. And Micah relays the answer from God as a judge in a court case. But not in hate. We hear words of heartfelt bewilderment, and the sovereign God pleads with the people he so deeply loves and calls his own. God's hurt continues to be with their failure to follow his dictates. God's disappointment was in a people that had supported, or failed to speak out against, exploitative policies that generated wealth for the small percent of people at the expense of the vulnerable. They asked "Can we give more sacrifices in the temple? We hear the Assyrians still sacrifice children to their gods – should we do that?" But what ignited God's anger wasn't going to be solved by more cattle being thrown on the bar-b-que at the Temple. What God's frustration was directed at were those that proclaimed to be faithful, who continued to "talk the talk" in worship, while failing to "walk the walk" outside the walls of the Temple.

Now is the time of the sentencing, and Micah relays God's message to them: "(God) has told you 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?" God judged them guilty of failing to do this. Only in finding humility, making sure all had what they need, valuing and exhibiting kindness – compassion – would the people of Israel be good in God's eyes.

And so the lectionary rockets us forward several centuries, to the words of God incarnate, God illuminated in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. The nature of Jesus' ministry was revealed from the moment of his birth in Bethlehem: a ministry of humility, a ministry of speaking out for the poor and marginalized in our world, a ministry of compassion in his teaching words and in his healing. But now, Jesus brings the growing number of disciples following him up to a mountain. Prior to this climb he had been healing. And this healing was done out of compassion, bringing people back into the community, back into the relationships they were denied because of these impediments. Those people, the discarded and shunned of the first century, who were believed to have done something wrong to deserve this fate, it was their fault they were blind or unable to walk, their fault demons racked their souls. Jesus' compassionate healing disputes this, and he makes them again a part of the community, a part of the "we" of life lived in relationship. But he takes a break from acts of compassion, to continue to teach compassion. On that mountaintop, he began to teach through a sermon. And he started this Sermon on the Mount with a list, often called the Beatitudes.

A Beatitude is, simply, a blessing. It's a word that can be translated equally from the original Greek as "happy", "fortunate", "rich." We hear this blessing repeated all through the Old Testament: in Psalms 118, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD"; in Jeremiah, "Blessed are those who trust in the LORD". We continually hear this emphasis on the happiness, the richness of life, that comes in placing ourselves – body, mind, heart and soul – in the hands of God and God alone. It's why we finish our worship of God together with the words "May the Lord bless you and keep you..."

The Gospel of Matthew recreates ancient teachings from the Old Testament, reframing them for first century ears. Jesus' ministry is presented as the new Exodus story, with Jesus being the new Moses. He had been saved from murdering foot soldiers sent by Herod, just as Moses was saved from Pharaoh. Jesus in his baptism and time of temptation has been through water and wilderness. And now, this "new Moses" will bring a new law to God's people. Just as Moses climbed to the heights of Mt. Sinai and brought down ten commandments on stone tablets as a guide with how to live in reverence to their Creator, Yahweh, Jesus also goes up a mountain, and presents God's law in new words: the Beatitudes, and the teachings that followed. They are Jesus Christ's version of the Ten Commandments (minus one). Like the Ten Commandments, there's danger in pulling out just one of these Beatitudes and leaning into it too

heavily. We can't follow God's law by saying, "Well, I'm only going to honor my parents and not commit adultery"; so also we need to also accept all of the Beatitudes as a coherent whole. The Ten Commandments build upon each other to develop a mental image of how to show love of God and love of neighbor. Rev. Charles James Cook published a reflection on the Beatitudes that helps show a way into living into the spirit of the Beatitudes, looking at them as a whole rather than individually. We can see they invite us into a way of God-breathed being in the world through three principles woven into them. He suggests those three principals for living into the spirit of the Beatitudes are simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion. This last one, compassion, is modeled on God's own being, essence, of love and mercy.

As a reminder: compassion is not a synonym for pity or sympathy. To have pity on another person means you feel sorry for them. Compassion goes deeper. Author and spiritual guide Henri Nouwen gives us this description: compassion is the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you, a recognition that cuts through any walls that might have separated you. Compassion is crossing the barriers created by land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance. It is acknowledging we *share* the gift of being created in God's image, and thus are all part of the human family. Compassion isn't temporarily hopping in and then out of someone else's life experience; compassion is walking in their shoes. It is reaching out to them, helping them up, putting ourselves in the middle of the systems that oppress them and try to keep them down. Compassion is seeing someone not as "them," but as part of "we."

Through these Beatitudes, these "Blessings," Jesus is helping his followers understand how to "walk the walk," not just "talk the talk." He isn't telling them what NOT to do in judgement, but giving them guidance on a life that is good in God's eyes, fleshing out what simply living in hope and compassion looks like. And – what Jesus is teaching is also found in what he didn't say. Because hearing this litany of blessed states of existence, it should leave us with questions: wait, if I'm rich, well – aren't I blessed? If I haven't experienced great loss that caused me to grieve – isn't that being blessed? If I fail to show mercy just one time – well, surely overall I'm still blessed? I feel blessed without being all those things that are listed – Jesus, why aren't you calling me blessed?

The answer gets more granular in the subsequent teachings throughout the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus DOES give a litany of things not to do, different from the do's and don't of the Torah. You need to be the salt of the earth, an example to others. You should avoid hypocrisy. There is peril in

succumbing to anger. Jesus talks about the importance of not turning to revenge and vindication, but loving our enemies. Giving to the needy, with no judgement and no expectation of repayment. Letting go of our reliance on money and possessions. Not judging others. Whew, it's a long, difficult list of expectations. It fills in the gaps of what is unsaid in the Beatitudes – to what causes us to *not* be blessed in the eyes of God. God is asking for total trust and devotion in him only, and asking that when we think of our neighbor, those God placed around us whether they look or talk or worship or act like us, we don't see them as "they," but instead see them as part of "we." The disciples throughout their time with Jesus repeated on several occasions: "This teaching is HARD. Who can understand it?" It seems at times beyond human capability. And what's hard to understand – how can we be expected to always act this way all the time? But Jesus was giving an answer to a question not yet articulated: what does it take to be called a follower of Jesus Christ? What does that look like to live the way of Christ? And what will it look like to others?

We introduce our children to the basics of Christian ethics in our Christian education. It often starts with being nice to others. Don't call other kids names. Don't get jealous of what others have. When someone falls on the playground, help them to get up! And as adults, we hope to carry those same Christian values into our adult interactions. But as adults, it gets more challenging. And with the responsibilities of adulthood, we may ponder "What if I just don't have any gas left in my goodness tank to take it beyond loving my immediate "we" that is around me in my daily life? Why wouldn't God bless me if I just don't think I have the capacity to also take care of "them." When is enough, enough?" Our world seems so much more complicated than what a first century Israeli peasant or fisher or tax collector or religious teacher faced. But we have to be pretty resistant to God's message to not see the parallels. God speaks to us through his Word today as he did when it was first told in stories around the dinner table, stories later recorded on scrolls. And so we must ask ourselves: How do we, aspiring to be known as God's people, followers of Christ Jesus, to take on the name Christians, how do we show our allegiance to God and God alone through the teachings of Jesus Christ? It's got to be more than a label. Christianity can easily become a "brand name" that we place on a person or group of persons, a label that creates an assumption of who and what they are. We need to be cautious, because branding can be deceptive. There are people who want to claim Christianity is an outward sign of piety – no smoking, drinking, give 10% of everything you have to the church, no cussin' – and if you cross any of these

behavioral lines, well, you can't be labeled "Christian." But beware: Just like buying a package off of the grocery shelf that proclaims "low-fat" – but the ingredients listed show the product is loaded with sodium and sugar to make it have any taste. Or the label that proclaims this item is "organic," and upcharges you \$2-4 for that obviously healthier choice – but not explaining that the ingredients of an "organic" product in the United States only need to be 50% organic to use that label. Yes, product packaging can become deceptive. It's meant to lure you into buying what is being sold so it seems like you are making the right choice – when you've really conceded that decision to bright colors and assumptions of "goodness." And so the same with the label "Christianity." Just because you slap that label on something, does NOT mean everything that follows is in line with the teachings and clear directives of God as revealed in his incarnated being, his Son Jesus Christ. Many want to claim what the ingredients are for being labeled "Christian." The ingredients are in the gospels that relay the teachings of who we want to be named after, Jesus Christ.

In the United States today, we're divided in so many ways. Being a student of history, this is not the first time that Christianity and how it was labeled, who defined it, was smack in the middle of issues that divided this nation. In the early 1800's, Bible verses were pulled out of context to justify the kidnapping and lifetime enslavement of persons of color from Africa, and their children and grandchildren in perpetuity, as Biblically ordained and a stated part of God's will. Fortunately, there were others that vehemently and vocally proclaimed and put their bodies on the line from a very different view of Biblical mandates and interpretations – and the Beatitudes were a part of the lens through which they interpreted Christian directives. In tumultuous times, the Beatitudes shed light on how Christians should view God's expectation: the call to see each other as being made in God's image, the call to love our neighbor, the call to compassion. If we want to continue to call ourselves Christian, we return every time to Jesus' new law to guide our thoughts, words and deeds.

Much of our division in our current time is cloaked under the mantle of "we need to get back to this being a Christian nation." I won't weigh in today on political policies, parties and the partisanship that use – from both sides – the call to claim their product of "christianity" to be the correct one. What I speak today out of the scripture of our lectionary is what does it mean to be *a follower of Christ*. Because we are living in a time of a rebranding of Christianity, using the label to sell a worldview that attempts to separate "we" from "them." It's full of sugar and salt to make your tastebuds dance, an image of healthiness and

wholesomeness, even if 50% of it is toxic misappropriation of the name and teachings of Jesus to lure people in for purposes of power and control. And this repackaging has allowed it to be misappropriated to shore up the halls of power. In the last two weeks, a posting went out from our government's executive social media site. A picture of our current president was front and center; in the upper left hand side in the background was the shadowed image of an armed, masked ICE agent. And at the bottom of this official White House posting were the words of Jesus: "Blessed are the peacemakers...." The not so subtle is clear: you should buy this brand of Christianity that uses guns and violence. That's what God thinks is good. That's how God wants us to find peace on the streets and peace of mind.

Would Jesus say that the events and statements and deeds going on in this nation were the arrival of the kingdom of heaven he was foretelling? Would he agree that the peacemakers he was blessing would look like the social media posting I just described? No. We are in a time of heresy, a repackaging of Jesus' Great Commission as "Go out into the world and force people at the end of a semi-automatic weapon following a God of hate, judgement and vindictiveness." A clever marketing ploy to add a little to the profit margin. Because it gives permission for our hate. It gives permission for our own judgementalism. It gives permission to be vindictive. But that permission does not come from God.

You may be arguing in your own mind, "But it's different today. "They" don't believe in Jesus. But "they" didn't come over this border legally. But "they" want to steal our blessings of healthcare and jobs and safety." But, but but. So hear this Biblical response to "but." In Luke Chapter 9, as Jesus and his disciples were walking over someone else's border, because it was the shorter way to Jerusalem, James and John lost their temper over the insults being hurled by the Samaritans, very religiously different people. So they turned to Jesus in self-righteous anger and asked, "Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?" And Jesus rebuked them. In some ancient manuscripts that were discovered after our Bible was closed, Jesus is quoted as saying "You don't realize what your hearts are like. For the Son of Man has NOT come to destroy people's lives, but to save them." Jesus was reminding them – God saves his blessing for the true peacemakers. And for those wanting to claim God's wrath on those they hated, well – God as judge and jury makes His ruling clear.

What is a Christian nation? Is it the label "Christian" that makes us blessed? The Beatitudes tell us very clearly – being a follower of Christ is not accomplished by just slapping a label Christian on ourself. And the events of the last few weeks are testing what are those ingredients that God labels "good", that

Jesus taught us. A mother of a young child in Minneapolis, whose last words were “I’m not mad at you” was killed in her car. The agent of the body the government is calling “peacemakers” fired three rounds at an unarmed human being while yelling expletives at her, and then let her bleed out. By way of rationalization, attempted explanation, the agent’s father explained on camera, “But, he’s a Christian.” And last Saturday, in the murder of another human being, Alex Pretti, an ICU nurse who wanted to see with his own eyes the tactics the government is deploying to use terror to instill “peace”, where do we see the following of Christ? Alex may or may not have claimed the label of Christian, branded himself with that cloak. However, Stacy Patton, a Presbyterian faith witness to the events of that day, described it this way. After Alex stood recording the events he was witness to, he stepped out in the open into the middle of the road, and reached up his other hand to direct vehicles to indicate when they could pass by safely. Then, seeing a woman being knocked down to the ground by government agents, he reached out again. Reaching for her hand. Reaching for clarity on her condition through the chemicals burning his eyes. Reaching to put *his* body between her and the violent language and action he was witnessing. And his last spoken words in life were: “Are you O.K.?” With his nervous system under assault, blinded, lungs on fire, his moral compass didn’t collapse into taking care of himself, attacking in self-defense. His focus expanded outward toward another human being in need. All of his *actions* shouted “You’re not going to face this alone.” The agents empowered by our government to round up any body that can be labeled “them” didn’t just shoot Alex as a protestor. They shot someone in the act of protecting a vulnerable woman. The 2-3 agents that fired 10 bullets into his prone body extinguished a life still reaching out in love of neighbor. His last visible choice, recorded by multiple phones, was compassion. So, who would Jesus say demonstrated “love of neighbor?” Who was the “Blessed peacemaker” in this instance?

In a truly Christian nation, we wouldn’t even have to ponder, or debate, this question. Now is the time to illuminate the false product being sold to you. Now is the time to reject the heretical teachings that say compassion only applies to those we think are worthy and have earned it. Now is a time for those of faith to truly show who IS your Lord and Savior. A Savior that didn’t resort to weapons and violence. A Savior that blessed those who lived reaching out to all as neighbors, regardless of the consequences.

Blessed be the true peacemakers. Amen.