SERMON
St. Peter's UCC
February 1, 2026

Scripture:
Micah 6:6-8 What God requires
Psalm 15:1-4, 5c
Matthew 5:1-12 The Beatitudes

Jesus, when he was about to begin his public ministry, was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Following that, he was tempted in the wilderness to turn away from his mission from heaven. Then, when John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus went north, up to a coastal town on the Sea of Galilee, and he started calling people to be his Apostles; Andrew and Peter, and James and John. Then Jesus, says the Gospel of Matthew, "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." It says that people from all over came to him to be healed, and great crowds followed him.

In our reading today from the Gospel of Matthew, it says that, "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, [the crowds] came to him. Then he began to speak."

So, that all leads to the words of Jesus that we heard this morning; what is called the Beatitudes; the sayings that start with the words, "Blessed are…" We are in the church season of Epiphany, meaning revealing, when we hear Gospel readings about the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. So, here is Jesus, followed by a great crowd, and about to speak his first major speech in the Gospel of Matthew. You can imagine just how important these words are to begin to see revealed this person Jesus, and what he thinks, and what's important to him; to hear a vision of how this world can be more heavenly. And what does Jesus do in his words? He turns upside down some of the values of the world, and reveals a vision of where our hope should lie; of what a more heavenly world would look like.

Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for

righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, and blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.

These are not words directed just at individuals, but rather, a vision of what a peaceful, God-filled community looks like: filled with humility, and an understanding of how much we need God; filled with care for others; filled with care for all in the community; filled with mercy, rather than harsh judging; filled with hearts that love others as we love ourselves; filled with efforts always to strive for peace, and finally filled with a willingness to suffer in order to live out these ways of God, knowing that the world will not change overnight.

So, there we have some of the first revealings of the Christ and of heaven in these words. It probably sounded very confusing. After all, the Jewish people had been humbled plenty by Romans, and by other empires before them. They wanted a bold leader to return them to the Kingdom of David, with a military force not to be trifled with. They wanted the chance to feel the pride of being their own people again, and not under

foreign authority. They wanted judgment by God on evil; the evil around them. Mercy can be for another time and place.

Still, the crowds followed, and the people rejoiced, because, somehow, everything Jesus said and did seemed to have the authority of God in his words and deeds. Something resonated in the people with Jesus; something that felt like Good News, and hope for a new age. Strange how so many were attracted to his message and his Spirit, even though Jesus didn't carry himself as a person who planned to defeat corruption and oppression in normal, worldly, perhaps violent ways. Strange how so many didn't reject him, saying perhaps, "He's a nice guy, but not what we need right now."

To this day, the churches of Christ in the world are still more countercultural than a smooth fit in the world. To this day, we are the reminder of what can be for our world, in our relationship with God and with each other. To this day, we are the encouragement and the hope and the vision of an age that we still are striving for, and that we still fall short of; a vision of peace on earth, goodwill toward all. To this day, we still do

well to hear again these early words of Jesus in his ministry, such as the beatitudes; to remember what matters, and to remember who we are to be, by the grace of God.

However, any sense that the path of Jesus is a passive one, when we hear words like meekness and mourning, like mercy and peacemakers, well, we need only look at the life of Jesus to see that he carried great force and power. We need only look at the lives and deaths of the Apostles to see that a courage founded on faith is very much part of the legacy and understanding of who we are as Christians.

Later in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus, in speaking of himself, says the following: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” The word “gentle” here, that Jesus uses to describe himself, is the same word for meekness in the beatitudes: “Blessed are the meek...” And when Jesus dares to enter Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, knowing what awaits him, and knowing that his followers wanted him to enter like a worldly king in a military chariot, Matthew recalls the prophecy that says,

“Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey...” Here again, in the word “humble,” it comes in the Greek from the same word from our beatitude: “Blessed are the meek....”

However, Jesus was anything but meek in our usual sense of the word. He was far from timid; he was not humble in the sense of letting the leaders of the Temple define him or define truth. Jesus was powerful, but he did not exercise his power harshly.

The character traits of the beatitudes may sound strange to the ear in our worldly way of thinking, but they can bring a community closer to each other, and closer to God.

In these humble and gentle words of the beatitudes, paradoxically, is a call to action. Next Sunday, we’ll hear the words that follow the beatitudes that we heard today, and you’ll hear Jesus telling us to get with it, to let your light shine. Jesus today is telling us how to be in ways pleasing to God, and then to trust that such ways are actually world-changing; transforming, both for individuals and communities.

Those who follow the blessings of our Gospel reading today are consecrated by God to follow, to listen, to learn, and then to serve. The last thing Jesus wanted was passivity. To be blessed by God does not mean that we can rest on our personal salvation. We are blessed by God to do something; to serve, to proclaim, to live as a resurrected people.

God and Jesus want us to make heaven on earth; it's in our Lord's Prayer. God is not content to have everyone suffer in the world, while individuals wait for heaven. God wants heaven's ways and heaven's Spirit everywhere, all the time; now and forever, not later and forever. God is an impatient God. Every bit of suffering, every misuse of free will, every back turned on God, every prideful heart that has no room for God, is another project for the faithful community of the poor in spirit and the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers.

We are stewards of God's Good News. By our commitment to God's ways and God's Spirit, we are claiming a belief in the coming Realm of God, and we are claiming that God's Realm has come near in Jesus. Perhaps most importantly, we are claiming that God looks to the church in

every generation to partner with heaven in sharing the Good News in word and in deed, to help bring God's realm to earth, as it is in heaven.

Be poor in spirit, so that God has room to work in you. Be meek, so that pride doesn't get in your way, but then be bold in the Spirit, trusting that Christ is with you. Be merciful, because we already have plenty of people in the world who are more than happy to judge others.

We here at St. Peter's can enjoy 2026 by focusing on how we can be a blessing to others, and then putting those blessings into practice.

Blessed are the churches, for they shall reveal heaven. As light guided the wisemen to the Christ child, may we of St. Peter's also shine brightly for others. May we help 2026 be a blessed year. Amen.