

**Sunday, February 1, 2026**  
**Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)**  
Matthew 5.1-12  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

**“But First, Blessing”**

Today we gather our parish family in preparation for our Annual Meeting. While there are certain pieces of business that need to be conducted at the Annual Meeting—electing new Vestry members, electing delegates to Diocesan Convention, and presenting the budget for the new year—the Annual Meeting really is first and foremost a celebration of our common life. A celebration of the work that we have chosen to enter into and engage together as the Body of Christ in this place at this time. One of the ways we do this is by sharing reports—written and verbal—from our parish leaders and from our various ministries. Not as a way of boasting about what we have done, of congratulating ourselves on what great people we are, but as a way of honoring and celebrating how we have used the resources God has entrusted to us as one small way in which the Kingdom of God is being built, one brick at a time, one life at a time.

Of course, what we do by way of ministry comes out of our understanding of what it means to be the Body of Christ, what it means to be faithful to God’s commandments, as we discern in Scripture. That’s one of the reasons that every time we gather in worship we hear the words of Scripture, and then explicate how those ancient words that have been passed down through the ages still apply to us in twenty-first century America. Paving the way for our individual and collective discernment as how to then put those words into action.

That said, what better Gospel for the day of our Annual Meeting than the Beatitudes. These well-known words are merely the first part of the much larger Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ first sermon, his first teaching opportunity, as he starts his public ministry. A chance for him to present his vision for his ministry and how those gathered can participate. While we often view this as Jesus preaching to a large crowd gathered on the top of a mountain, that is not entirely true. Look at the first two verses of the passage: “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, saying . . .” The “them” is not the crowds, but the disciples. The inner circle. The ones who are his partners in ministry, who will be called upon to do the work of ministry. Sure the crowd is there, but at this point, Jesus is not speaking to them. He is speaking directly to the disciples. The crowd just happens to be listening in. This being Jesus’ first sermon, and him directing the Beatitudes to his disciples, this is effectively him giving them an orientation as to the work they will be doing as disciples. This is him giving the disciples an overview of the ministry they have signed on to. In some ways, not unlike what we do at Annual Meeting, with our overview of ministry—where we have been and where we go from here.

At first glance, it is easy to look at the Beatitudes—a list of items, each beginning with “Blessed are . . .”—as a list of marching orders. As a list of instructions on how to achieve blessedness. How to obtain God’s divine blessing. A common interpretation being that if we do these things, if we take care of and minister to those listed in the Beatitudes—the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are merciful, those

who are pure in heart, those who are peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, those who are reviled falsely—that if we care for these, they will experience God's blessing. And in turn, we also will be blessed. Or, looked at slightly differently, that if we ourselves are poor in spirit, or mourn, or are meek, or hunger and thirst for righteousness, or are merciful, or are pure in heart, or are peacemakers, or are persecuted for righteousness' sake, or are reviled falsely, then we will be blessed.

These are natural and, I suppose, logical interpretations. After all, from a big-picture perspective, religion—any religion, our own included—is concerned with divine blessing: how to get it, how to keep it, who is entitled to it and who isn't, and so on. The only problem is, in viewing the Beatitudes as a list of things that we have to do to provide blessing to others or to obtain blessing for ourselves kind of misses the point on how God operates. Taken as a spiritual to do list, as a list of obligations, risks turning the Beatitudes into something transactional.

But when you truly dissect what Jesus is saying, that is not the case at all. It's right there in the first of the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." There is no transaction. The kingdom of heaven is already theirs. Nothing need be done to obtain the kingdom of heaven. It is open and available purely by virtue of being "poor in spirit." And if the poor in spirit are welcomed into the kingdom of heaven, what about those who are rich in spirit? Or even so-so in spirit? Surely, they too are welcome in the kingdom of heaven. And in reality, aren't we all poor in spirit? I would venture that we could all do a little better in that department. As you go through the Beatitudes, you could build similar arguments about each.

The point is, when you really look at what Jesus is saying, he is presenting a confounding and counterintuitive assessment of what it means to be blessed. Particularly in a world—both then and now—in which it is easy to assume the blessed are those who are rich, happy, strong, satisfied, well-liked, even ruthless, deceptive, aggressive, and so on. Yet, Jesus says the truly blessed are actually those who are poor, who are mourning, who are meek, and so on. He is making a statement about who is already blessed, not a proclamation of how to get and keep God's blessing. On the contrary, Jesus is saying the most important thing about divine blessing is that it already is. It has been graciously given. And not just in those places and those circumstances we would expect. It is also given—it is especially given—in those places and circumstances that may seem to us far from being blessed. Because that is how God operates. By grace. We receive blessing as pure gift. Not as something to be earned. Not as a reward for good behavior or right action. As pure gift.

This is Jesus' message in the Beatitudes. Before he gets to the instructions in latter parts of the Sermon on the Mount, he sets the stage by noting that, what we need to remember above all else, is that no matter who we are, we are blessed by God—even if we don't always feel it. And we need to remember that the people Jesus was preaching to on that mountaintop were, by and large, the poor and marginalized, the sick and infirmed. Those who would certainly not consider themselves to be blessed. So the Beatitudes are meant to be words of comfort, consolation, and encouragement to such as these and to all of us. All who hear Jesus' words are already blessed by God. And part of the blessedness freely given to us is the assurance that the kingdom of heaven is already open to us. Not just open to us, but that we are already a part of

it, by sheer virtue of God's grace. By sheer virtue of being beloved children of God. The unspoken message, as Jesus prepares for the rest of his sermon, as he begins to move into the actual instructional parts of the Sermon on the Mount, is that by virtue of being part of God's kingdom, we are invested in its operation. We are invested in the ongoing work of the kingdom.

With that as background, with that as the foundation for our faith and understanding of relationship with God and with Jesus, we return to the subject of the day—to the subject of what it means for us as a parish, as the Body of Christ in this place. If the Beatitudes are not imperatives, not commandments, not a list of social ethics, why do we spend so much time focusing on ministry? Because, rather, the Beatitudes are a declaration of the promise of divine blessing that is cause for consolation, gratitude, and joy. The Beatitudes are a declaration, an affirmation, that we are all blessed to be part of God's kingdom. As such, we are invested in the work of that kingdom. And ministry is our response to that gratitude and joy for blessings freely given. Our ministry is not about seeking to acquire blessing, but about responding to it. It is about sharing in tangible ways the blessings we ourselves have received. So that others may come to know that they, too, are blessed and that the kingdom of heaven is theirs, as well.