



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## Blessed Are You

### Sermon for Epiphany 4, Annual Meeting Sunday, February 29, 2017

*Readings:* Micah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12; Psalm 15

*Sermon text:* 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? Micah 6:8

Let's take this in three pieces, good trinitarians that we are. God has three requirements for humans, according to the prophet Micah. Jesus has nine blessings, as listed in the opening passage from the Sermon on the Mount that we read this morning. If we divide the nine "beatitudes" into three parts of three each...and correlate the three parts with Micah's three requirements and also with the three goals of our strategic plan, well, I hope the sermon won't be too long.

Let's keep it simple. We'll start where Jesus started—and where he stayed—with those who **walk humbly with God**.

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:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Two things about this teaching of Jesus were new in the ancient world. To the Greeks and Romans, the idea that humility or meekness was a virtue was odd, upside-down. Aristotle held up rather the "great-souled person"—whose virtue is to be beneficent and grand. Slaves were meek and humble. To the Jews, poverty and loss were signs of God's displeasure. Moses puts before the people blessings and curses: blessings of land, children, wealth if the commandments were obeyed; curses of poverty, displacement, death if they were ignored and violated.

Jesus is not suggesting that poverty, loss and death are themselves blessings. Rather, he is saying that God is with those who are poor, in body or spirit, who have lost and now mourn, who are meek and downtrodden. They are not being punished by God. On the contrary, they are blessed. In the future they will be comforted and rewarded—and even now can be strengthened in adversity by knowing that they are beloved of God. Theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.

This is the blessing of faith and trust in God’s love. If we believe in our hearts that God is with us, even now, no matter what we are suffering, just as Jesus was with us and for us, even in his suffering, then we can go through the hard parts of life with greater hope and less fear. To be patient under the burden of our afflictions, to have hope and faith even in the midst of loss and mourning—these are blessings because they bring us to the heart of God. And when we feel and know ourselves beloved of God somehow we can endure, get stronger, even help others—and thus we take our part in life’s great web of care. This is the spiritual practice that Jesus teaches. Start with humility, walk humbly with your God, and come to Jesus for consolation and inspiration. You will be comforted, strengthened, renewed.

The church’s purpose is to bring you closer to God in Christ so that this blessing may be yours. *Growth in spiritual vitality* is our first goal. We are launching the RenewalWorks program to take an assessment of where we are at now in our spiritual life and practices, so that we may plan to do better, to grow in Christ—and thus help not only ourselves but others. Let’s pray together, study together, here in church and in our own homes, with our families and at work too.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.  
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

This is the **love kindness** part. This requirement goes together with “do justice” to fulfill one half of what Jesus called the great commandment: love God with all your being, and love your neighbor as yourself. Love of neighbor requires both mercy (kindness) and justice.

Before we get to purity of heart, and the beatific vision, we need to long for righteousness—for a right relationship with God and neighbor. We learn love of neighbor through empathy and understanding—trying to put ourselves in each other’s shoes, reaching out helping hands—not as a benefactor standing above but brother and sister standing alongside. Sometimes you give, sometimes you need to receive. But the math is simple: If we give more than we take, the world grows brighter and better. Differences fade and people grow closer when working together. Jesus taught that you will be judged as you judge others; just so, those who are merciful will receive mercy. Practicing kindness will work a wonderful cleansing of your heart. You will grow in love and see God. For you will learn to see Christ in the face of a stranger.

This is the second goal: to build what Howard Thurman called the beloved community. Hopefully, this means *growth in numbers* of people attending worship services, joining as members and pledging support. But these metrics, though useful, do not get at what kind of community we hope to be. At best, Grace is not just an assembly of acquaintances or congregation of members—but a true church, a community of friends who follow the Way of Jesus. Some will be new to the Way, some more experienced; some older, some younger, some exploring faith, some deeply centered in Christ. Some from here, some only on weekends, some recently arrived from other countries. But all welcome, all needed, all together. To grow our beloved

community we must *invite, welcome and connect*. I urge you to invite your friends to join you here. We live in an age of disconnected people who long for community and friendship. “Only connect,” as E.M Forster once wrote. Life grows richer from friendship. Just watch our children as sing together in church, learn together in class, and then, as youth, go on mission trips.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“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.”

This is the **do justice** part. We are generally more comfortable with charity than justice work. The great Roman Catholic bishop to the slums of Brazil, Dom Helder Camara, once said, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” (He is being considered for canonization now, along with Archbishop Romero.)

Our third goal is *grow in regional impact*. This flows from the nature of community building I just talked about. But this effort involves more than just making friends, building community and taking care of those in need. It means doing what we vow to do in our baptismal covenant, strive for justice and peace. It means challenging systemic racism, poverty, and inequality. In so doing we will encounter opposition. We may even be reviled and persecuted. But if we have done the work of step one: having actual humility and meekness, proceeding nonviolently with the power of truth and force of love—then we will not fall into the trap of becoming like those we decry, one self-righteous person against another. Having done step two, and built community across all sorts of lines and across all kinds of bridges, we will recognize that we can be allies in some things and opponents in others. And that is okay; we can disagree about objectives and tactics. Peace and justice are goals you never reach, only keep striving toward.

But you can see what can happen for the good if you look at our EPIC youth leadership development program, which under Abby’s gifted leadership has fostered an amazing power of self-expression and new horizons among a cohort of a some dozen high school students. All of them are immigrants or children of immigrants, some still learning English, often unseen and unnoticed in school, most have to work to support their families as well as attend school (in a second language). But they have the same dreams as other kids of a good and productive life. If you haven’t taken the opportunity to meet them on a Friday evening, do so. You will be inspired. They will change the world.

Blessed are you, who sit here this morning, and may God continue to bless Grace Church. May we continue to be a place that helps people get closer to Gods heart, closer to each other, and closer to God’s dream of the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

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