

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

JANUARY 29, 2023



ST. JOHN

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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***Please stand if comfortably able
and respond with words in bold print**

***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

ONE: Jesus taught: Blessed are the poor in spirit.
He said that the realm of God is theirs.

MANY: We read that those who mourn are blessed.

Jesus said they will be comforted.

The meek will inherit the earth.

The merciful will obtain mercy.

All who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed;

Jesus said they will be filled.

Blessed are the pure in heart and the peacemakers;

They are God's children and will see God.

Those persecuted and falsely accused are blessed.

Even in the face of evil, we will rejoice.

***INVOCATION:** Let the mountains hear our voices raised in prayers and praise, wise and holy God. We gather in this sacred place to honor and adore you. We come humbly, claiming the cross of Jesus Christ as our sign. We give thanks that you lift up the weak and lowly, defy the world's foolishness, and invite us to share in life at its fullest and best as disciples of Jesus. We want to accept your invitation. Amen.

***CALL TO CONFESSION:**

God knows the intent of our hearts as we come to this time of repentance. Are we intent on doing justice? Do we love mercy? Are we ready to walk humbly with our Creator? If so, God is ready to hear our prayers.

***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION:**

O God, we confess that we have accepted the world's wisdom as our guide. We have been impressed by the power of weapons and the importance of high positions. We measure worth by the number of possessions we command. We have been unkind in our speech and uncaring in our deeds. We have doubted the power of the cross to save. Turn us around, holy God, that we might be blessed. Amen.

***ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:**

God destroys the wisdom of those who think themselves wise. God chooses the weak and foolish to shame those who think themselves strong and all-knowing. The God who forgives calls us to a life of kindness in word and deed, mercy toward both friend and foe, and justice in all our dealings. Thank God for setting before us standards that surpass our highest aspirations, along with the possibility for joyous fulfillment.

FIRST TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE READING: Micah 6:1-8

God's dispute with Israel

6 Hear what the LORD is saying:

Arise, lay out the lawsuit before the mountains;
let the hills hear your voice!

² Hear, mountains, the lawsuit of the LORD!
Hear, eternal foundations of the earth!

The LORD has a lawsuit against his people;
with Israel he will argue.

³ "My people, what did I ever do to you?
How have I wearied you? Answer me!

⁴ I brought you up out of the land of Egypt;
I redeemed you from the house of slavery.
I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam before you.

⁵ My people, remember what Moab's King Balak had planned,
and how Balaam, Beor's son, answered him!
Remember everything^[a] from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you might learn to recognize the righteous acts of the LORD!"

What does the LORD require?

⁶ With what should I approach the LORD
and bow down before God on high?
Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings,
with year-old calves?

⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with many torrents of oil?
Should I give my oldest child for my crime;
the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit?

⁸ He has told you, human one, what is good and
what the LORD requires from you:
to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly
with your God.

EPISTLE READING: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Human wisdom versus the cross

¹⁸ The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved. ¹⁹ It is written in scripture: *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will reject the*

intelligence of the intelligent.^{[a] 20} Where are the wise? Where are the legal experts? Where are today's debaters? Hasn't God made the wisdom of the world foolish?²¹ In God's wisdom, he determined that the world wouldn't come to know him through its wisdom. Instead, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching.²² Jews ask for signs, and Greeks look for wisdom,²³ but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.²⁴ But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's power and God's wisdom.²⁵ This is because the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ Look at your situation when you were called, brothers and sisters! By ordinary human standards not many were wise, not many were powerful, not many were from the upper class.²⁷ But God chose what the world considers foolish to shame the wise. God chose what the world considers weak to shame the strong.²⁸ And God chose what the world considers low-class and low-life—what is considered to be nothing—to reduce what is considered to be something to nothing.²⁹ So no human being can brag in God's presence.³⁰ It is because of God that you are in Christ Jesus. He became wisdom from God for us. This means that he made us righteous and holy, and he delivered us.³¹ This is consistent with what was written: *The one who brags should brag in the Lord!*

***GOSPEL READING: Matthew 5:1-12**

5 ¹ Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. ² He taught them, saying:

Happy people

³ "Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

⁴ "Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

⁵ "Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

⁷ "Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

⁹ "Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God's children.

¹⁰ "Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

¹¹ "Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. ¹² Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

These are the ancient Words revealed to us anew.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

GOSPEL LESSON: “A Different Way to Understand the Beatitudes” With thoughts from Rev. N.T. Wright

The Sermon on the Mount

When we think about Jesus, we usually think of him as a great teacher. If we describe him that way we will misunderstand him. Today’s passage is the beginning of the famous “Sermon on the Mount”, which runs through chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Matthew’s gospel. People often say what a wonderful teaching the Sermon on the Mount is, and that if only people would obey it the world would be a better place. But if we think of Jesus simply sitting there telling people how to behave properly, we will miss what was really going on.

These “blessings”, also called the “wonderful news”, that he’s announcing, are not saying “try hard to live like this.” These beatitudes are saying that people who already *are* like that are in good shape. They should be happy and celebrate.

Jesus is not suggesting that these are simply timeless truths about the way the world is, about human behavior. If Jesus was saying that, he was wrong. Mourners often go uncomforted, the meek don’t inherit the earth, those who long for justice frequently take that longing to the grave. This is an upside-down world, or perhaps a right-way-up world; and Jesus is saying that with his work, it’s starting to come true. This is an announcement, not a philosophical analysis of the world. It’s about something that’s starting

to happen, not about a general truth of life. It is *gospel*; good news, not good advice.

(if you read closely this passage, you discover that Jesus is NOT telling us how to act. He is describing how people act who are already living in the realm or world of God.)

(Because Jesus came to us, he is ushering in the news that the kingdom of God or realm of God, is coming. He is bringing God’s world to us, little by little, like clouds moving away to allow the sun to shine on us. Think of it as a wave coming over our earth, to bring a different world to us.)

Follow me, Jesus said to the first disciples; because in Jesus the living God was doing a new thing, and this list of “blessings” or “wonderful news, is part of his invitation, part of his summons, part of his way of saying that God is at work in a fresh way and that this is what it looks like. Jesus is beginning a new era for God’s people and God’s world. From here on, all the controls people thought they knew about are going to work the other way round. In our world, still, most people think that wonderful news consists of success, wealth, long life, victory in battle. Jesus is offering wonderful news for the humble, the poor, the mourners, the peacemakers. The point is not to offer a list of what sort of people God normally blesses. The point is to announce God’s new covenant or promise.

So when do these promises come true? There is a great temptation for Christians to answer: in heaven, after death. At first sight, verses 3, 10 and 11 seem to say this: “ the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit and the persecuted, and there’s a great reward ‘in heaven’ for

those who suffer persecution for Jesus' sake. According to Rev. Wright, this though is a misunderstanding of the meaning of 'heaven'. Heaven is God's space, where full reality exists, close by our ordinary ('earthly') reality and interlocking with it. (Partially cloudy – partially sunny) One day heaven and earth will be joined together for ever, and the true state of affairs, at present out of sight, will be unveiled. After all, verse 5 says that the meek will inherit the earth, and that can hardly happen in a disembodied heaven after death.

No, the clue comes in the next chapter, in the prayer Jesus taught his followers. We are to pray that God's kingdom will come, and God's will be done, "on earth as it is in heaven." The life of heaven – the life of the realm where God is already king – is to become the life of the world, transforming the present "earth" into the place of beauty and delight that God always intended. And those who follow Jesus are to begin to live by this rule here and now.

That's the point of the Sermon on the Mount, and these "beatitudes" in particular. They are a summons to live in the present in the way that will make sense in God's promised future; because that future has arrived in the present in Jesus of Nazareth. It may seem upside down, but we are called to believe, with great daring, that it is in fact the right way up. Try it and see. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Beginning with a time for silent personal prayer.

Lord God, we give you thanks for all your gifts to us — for daily food, for health, for each breath we take, for freedom to choose, and for the gifts of your word, your power and your love. Our hearts are truly overwhelmed, O God, when we consider how you have entrusted so much to us. May we be worthy of that trust. May we be a people who are unafraid to live as fully and as richly as you want us to live.

Help us, O God, as followers of Jesus, to multiply all that you have given us, to risk spreading your word and perhaps see it misunderstood, to gamble by loving those whom others think worthy only of hate, to take chances by doing good to those who have not done good to us. Help us be faith-filled and desire to increase your glory and your goodness in this world. Make us people who share in both word and deed that which you have given to us.

We pray for the church gathered today, both here and around the world, that it may encourage all of its members to discover, develop and use all their gifts, those of nature and those of grace.

We pray for those who are poor in body or in spirit, for those oppressed and heavy laden, for those sick or in despair, especially [names here]. Minister by your Spirit and by us, to all those for whom we have prayed, and help us walk faithfully in the path of our Lord Jesus Christ.

THE LORD'S PRAYER:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

***COMMISSION AND BLESSING:**

Walk blamelessly before God and do what is right.

Speak the truth to all, from your heart.

We will honor and fear God each day.

May our words and deeds resist all evil.

Consider your call and live righteously.

Know that God chooses you for a blessing.

We delight in seeking to do God's will.

We are awed that God appoints and blesses us.

Rejoice and be glad, for God offers rich rewards.

From God you receive wisdom and true power.

We are amazed at the responsibility God gives us.

We rejoice in the blessings God promises.

Amen. **Amen.**

PRAYER LIST: Urban Baum, David Seneczyn, Cheri Schutzenhofer, Theo Mally, Becky Ballard, Rosemary Williams, Jack O'Day, Ronald Bopp, Floyd Lorenz, Alister and Garrett Pickens.