

A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian
Trinity Episcopal Church
1 February 2026
Micah 6:1-81; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12
“Rock of Ages”

If you think of Rockefeller Center, you probably imagine an iconic skyscraper, Christmas tree, and skating rink, but it is actually a complex of 19 buildings, which also houses a remarkable collection of public art – sculpture, mosaics, panels, and huge, vivid murals:

The Immigrant – a barefoot mother and child, seeking new life in the promise of America.

Swords Into Plowshares – an appeal for world peace, inscribed with the citation, *Isaiah II:IV*.¹

American Progress – laborers standing on the wheels of industry, alongside the muses of poetry, music, and dance, and the figures of Gandhi, Lincoln, and Emerson. The message? Economic strength and moral conscience are not enemies when each is rooted in virtue.

In another, a light shines on a widely diverse crowd of people, and we read these words:

Man's ultimate destiny depends not on whether he can learn new lessons, discoveries and conquests, but upon his acceptance of the lesson taught close on to two thousand years ago.

The subject of this mural is the very Gospel we heard today: Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek.

Blessed are the pure in heart.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus strips away the painting of life *we* have created to reveal the canvas of God underneath. And in that, one thing becomes perfectly clear:

God's mural is not *our* mural...

...because on *our* canvas, the meek do *not* inherit the earth, but are often ignored, marginalized, or targeted. Some dismiss pureness in heart as just another label for naivete or stupidity. In our canvas, an attack on science and medicine slashes research funding, and makes way for the return of childhood diseases. While claiming to honor family values, childcare and feeding programs are cut, educators ignored, and access to health care increasing limited. An utter erosion of civility cheers the public mocking of afflicted persons. Dog-whistle calls invite and justify retaliation upon elected officials and judges whose rulings are unwelcome, and we see bumper stickers of Jesus holding an American flag in one hand and an assault weapon in the other, brandishing the word, “Freedom.”

Whoever you voted for, I cannot bring myself to believe this is the mural you had in mind.

And something which should dismay and outrage anyone facing this altar is that among the groups most intent on shooting down the Gospel message of justice, mercy, and peace, are those from within the ranks of Christian nationalism. So that you are perfectly clear, the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America is *not* within that rank.

¹ Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

With all that, and in the face of what we are currently witnessing on the streets of our national cities, I will say this: These *so-called* Christians no more represent the Gospel of Jesus Christ than these paramilitary-style ICE agents represent the honorable men and women of community law enforcement – disciplined, trained, professional, unmasked police officers, soldiers, and *legitimate* immigration agents, who faithfully serve every single day, at great personal risk, on behalf of the common good.

Trust your eyes and be clear about the difference. The one is not the other.

And do not try to tell me, a daughter of two immigrants, that it has always been this way. No, it hasn't. Granted, American democracy has never been perfectly applied, and the rule of law is never a finished work, but it is the only path to a national life rooted in deep principle and high ideal. And right now, on our watch, that glorious democracy is fragile, vulnerable to those who, despite their oath to preserve, protect, and defend it, would see it dismantled for personal gain, or who remain silent while others do the dismantling.

It falls upon *us* to preserve, protect, and defend it, but that is never easy or without risk. The Gospel was never intended to make things easy – it is intended to set things *right*.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account, for their reward is great in heaven.

I pray that the grieving parents of Alex Pretti find some measure of comfort in this.

But lest we simply wait and hope for such comfort, remember that the kingdom of heaven painted by Jesus is meant to be realized in this life on *earth*. As for how to bring that kingdom into being, there are countless sources of wisdom, scriptural and secular, but today, I am mindful of a creed written in 1941, the words forever etched in the heart of a great American city, in a building nicknamed, "30 Rock":

I believe that government is the servant of the people and not their master.

I believe in the dignity of labor, whether with head or hand; that the world owes no man a living, but owes every man an opportunity to make a living.

I believe that truth and justice are fundamental to an enduring social order.

I believe in an all-wise and all-loving God, named by whatever name.

I believe that love is the greatest thing in the world; that it alone can overcome hate; and that right can and will triumph over might.

Not the words of some politically correct, starry-eyed soul, but of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. himself – a dynastically wealthy financier, titan of industry, heir to Standard Oil, and life-long Republican. Granted, he was far from unblemished in this life, but, as someone of great privilege, perhaps he can remind us, in *our* great privilege, of that mural in his namesake complex, bidding us to "accept that lesson taught near on 2000 years ago:"

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

And blessed are we if we accept it...and refuse to accept *anything* else. Amen.