

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany February 1, 2026 jj
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✠ sdg ✠

Jesus sat on a mountain side, a high vantage point on a ridge that probably looked out on the entire Sea of Galilee below, and there, in that scenic point, by teaching simple-sounding things, He revealed a kingdom. He was no mere enlightened man passing along the secret to peace in this war-torn world. This instead is Jesus, the very Son of God, whisking you away into another world, by means of His teaching. He brings you into His kingdom, the kingdom for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer.

In these opening words to the Sermon on the Mount, called the Beatitudes, Jesus tells you things that only God can tell you, that only God can know, and that you can believe only after God gives you His miraculous gift of faith to believe it. A man sitting on a mountaintop is not divine; there have been a lot of those in the world. A man merely teaching or preaching is not divine, either. But when THIS MAN, Jesus, sits on the mountaintop and when He preaches THESE WORDS to you, He shows you He is God because He says things to you that only God is able to know about you and to say with a straight face, I might add. He sees you in the way that only God is able to see you.

Now, no one on the street would ever say, "I am blessed because I feel inwardly empty, like I have nothing to give anybody and must rely completely on others for everything." No, our human sense of worth compels us to make a contribution-or at least to want to make a contribution. But Jesus comes along and says, "Forget about all that." Jesus says, in My kingdom, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the

kingdom of heaven." That is to say, God considers you to be in the best possible position with Him when you are completely helpless in His work of salvation, and when you stop trying to make your contribution or do your part in the work that only He can do for you. Blessed are you who are poor in spirit, you who realize that you are so empty inside that you cannot even feel religious. Yours is the kingdom of heaven because now, as you've figured out, you must rely on Jesus and Him only.

· Can you imagine a widow saying something like, "God has blessed me by allowing my gentle, caring and thoughtful husband to die, leaving me here alone to fend for myself"? Would that even cross her mind? Or what would you think of the fearful mother and the helpless father who claim, "God has blessed us by allowing our child to become seriously ill"? The man on the street would consider such people to be insane. No one would consider fear or grief to be expressions of happiness and contentment.

But Jesus says, "Blessed- the word He used means, happy under God's blessing-are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." No matter what you endure in this life, and no matter what you shall lose, you shall be comforted. Guaranteed. God the Son promises you that your losses, however many they may be, shall all become gains. You shall be comforted when the dark night of your struggle dawns in the morning light of the resurrection at the Last Day, the resurrection that was earned for you by Christ's own resurrection from the dead.

· What were to happen if I were to ask, "Will everyone who is humble please stand up?" If you stand up, you would be publicly proclaiming your humility—or making a boast about it. If you remain seated, you would be saying that you are not humble, but proud. Humility-or meekness-is not a personal quality that you can cultivate or measure in yourself. No one succeeds in developing meekness on his own; one only becomes inwardly proud that one has made him or herself seem so humble or meek to others.

So then, Jesus speaks something impossible to you when He says, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Your lowly, lifting others ahead of yourself type of humility comes about in your life only by the miracle of God. You become meek only when God's condemning Law crushes you and when it forces you to realize how impoverished of spirit you are and how grievous is your condition. But when your old self gets crucified with all of its sins and evil desires, then God regards you, clothed in Christ like a pure, clean robe, as blessed and happy. Then you are blessed and happy because God loves to pick you up from being knocked down, wiping you clean of all your sins and giving you a place of honor in His Kingdom and Church.

· "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." Without God speaking to us in His Law and His Gospel (Romans 3:21-22), none of us would ever perceive the persistent unrighteousness that we have within us, much less hunger and thirst for God's righteousness. But Jesus speaks two miracles and two promises bundled together right here in this Beatitude. First He speaks about the miracle that you even perceive

your hunger and thirst for righteousness. Through the Word of God, the Holy Spirit has entered your heart and your mind and He has revealed to you that there is nothing there that may be considered righteous—"nothing good in me" as St. Paul says about himself in Romans 7. But then, after Jesus points to your unrighteousness, He also promises you at the same time, "You shall be filled." Your hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be filled through the hearing of the Word, through eating the Lord's Supper, through your leaving life on this earth to dwell eternally with God where there shall be no more hunger (Revelation 7:16).

· Life would appear to be nasty and brutish, said Thomas Hobbes, and is most successfully lived by people who are themselves nasty and brutish. But Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." Yet mercy does not adhere to our sinful hearts and minds. Only self-preservation works in our dog-eat-dog world. Just as it is written, "We love because [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:1), so also may it be said, "We show mercy only because God first showed mercy to us." Your ability to show mercy is a divinely-given ability; as it was with humility, it is a matter of faith, declaring your divinely-given conviction that God shall still show mercy to you when you are called to account before His throne.

· If you honestly examine your own heart, you will see only impurity and sin. If you pass judgment about the way you struggle in this life, you will be tempted to think your struggles are indicating that God is not actually at peace with you, that He is angry with you, and that you owe Him something. But none of that is true. Jesus the Son of

God looks at you in a way only God can, and you could never see in yourself: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" and "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."

Your blessedness in the eyes of God has come to you, not because you figured out how to purify your own heart, but because God Himself declares to you right now that your heart is purified completely by Jesus' death for your sins. Blessedness is yours, not because you figured out a way to make peace with God, but because God declares peace with you on account of Jesus' sacrificial death for your sake.

· Jesus even says it is a good thing for your family and co-workers and fellow classmates to pick on you because of your Christian faith. It is a good thing for people to look down their noses at you for what seems like a pathological over-dependence on Jesus or a seemingly fanatical commitment to the pure Word of God, or to Baptism and Holy Communion. It is a good thing when some Christians snobbishly conclude that you do not have the special gift of the Holy Spirit because you do not pray in some meaningless tongue or worship using the same style of music as they do. It is a good thing when other Christians consider you hard-hearted or old-fashioned because you will not throw away the clear words of Scripture and welcome a more "modern" style Christianity in your midst, like being more tolerant of sinful lifestyles, which is really no Christianity at all (Galatians 1:6-7). It is a good thing when it seems like the entire world hates you on account of the Christian faith that God has given to you. So suffered the prophets and other believers before you. Yet for all of their hatred and condescension and religious

bigotry against you, God's promise to you cannot be taken away: "yours is the kingdom of heaven."

Today's Gospel begins, "When Jesus saw the crowds. He began to teach them." Today's Gospel carries well the Epiphany theme that Jesus truly is God the Son, the One who speaks the Word of God to you from the very heart of God. By revealing His divine nature to you, through speaking in the way only God speaks to you, Jesus says things to you and about you that you could never know otherwise. You know how you belong in God's kingdom because you know who Jesus, your king, is.

For because of Jesus, you are God's blessed ones, inheritors of the kingdom. You may not feel blessed in the midst of your poverty of spirit, your mourning over losses, your humility, or your hunger and thirst for righteousness. You may not feel blessed in these things, but in these things you are most certainly blessed because God says you are blessed. Your Baptism and the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion seal these promises, these Beatitudes onto you. You might not walk around feeling in your heart the sort of mercy, purity and peace that we heard about today from Jesus' teaching. Be that as it may: you are truly the blessed ones of God because the Father has shown you mercy in Christ His Son, making you able to be merciful. He has purified your hearts with the forgiveness of sins, so that you shall see God. He has made peace with you through death and resurrection, and in so doing He has named you "sons of God." Everything you pray for every day in the Lord's Prayer is already your possession because Jesus has revealed the kingdom to you, and embraced you into it forever. Why not pray it every day?

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.