

The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
St. Michael's Church, February 16, 2025
The Rev. Joshua Wong

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, as we begin this day, we offer you our hearts and our lives. May we live according to the beautiful teachings in the Beatitudes, knowing that in doing so, we are drawing closer to you. Amen.

Today's Gospel finds us with the apostles and Jesus coming down from the mountaintop. Scripture says that there was a large crowd of diverse multitudes that came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Everyone was trying to touch him for power came out from him and healed all of them.

If you recall, I mentioned that in the season of Epiphany we will hear stories of Jesus' life on earth, but also that his life *then* is relevant to our lives *now* in 2025. And Jesus' teaching could not be more relevant for to our present time in American policies towards the poor, the down trodden, and the outcast.

Scripture says, Jesus looked up at his disciples and said a series of statements that begin with the words "Blessed are." Jesus presents what we call the Beatitudes. These Blessed statements were not ethical recommendations, as if Jesus is saying, go and become poor, hungry, sad, and outcast. Instead, Jesus is saying, when we

look around us in the world, it seems as if the rich, well fed, happy and admired have it made, that God's blessings belong to them, and that the rest of us — the poor, hungry, sad, and excluded — we are forgotten.

But Jesus is not saying that, I've come to tell you that the opposite is true: the dawning kingdom of God belongs to you, the poor, the hungry, the sad, and the excluded! When the kingdom of God happens, *as it has now begun to come*, you will have the places of highest honor! And for those who are rich now, Jesus warns them not to be too comfortable. The "woes," are a direct challenge to those who are rich and privileged to lead a more just and generous way of life. For God's realm is dawning, the Great Jubilee has begun. The Great Jubilee is in reference to the event that happens every 50 years, in which according to Jewish custom, all debts are forgiven, and all slaves free, in order for everyone in society to be on an equal footing.

During our vestry meeting this week, we reflected on this passage. One member observed that the Beatitude includes both the blessed and the woeful. Our lives fit into both of these categories. To our vestry member, this passage was a warning that we should not be proud because life's circumstances can change instantly.

What stood out to me when reading this passage was something similar—there was a time element involved. This passage speaks about present and future. Presently, if you are privileged, if you have plenty, be warned not to rely on what you have, but to share with those who don't. And for those who are poor and scared, be assured that God has not forgotten you, and your future is in God's hands. This is what the Jubilee year was about. Taking care of each other, so that everyone will have an equal footing, and therefore society will be restored with justice and respect. As another vestry member shared, we all need mercy, because we are all vulnerable, all it takes is something unexpected to happen to change the projection of our lives.

Hence, Jesus teaches us to be merciful and remember to care for the poor.

While we are on earth, the Beatitudes can be challenging to understand if we follow the world's definition of "blessing." Few give thanks for poverty, hunger, or grief as Jesus did in his sermon. Most contemporary people have a very different idea of what makes a blessed life. Money, beauty, power, achievement, and fame—we hold these things in high esteem. If only we had them, or just one of them, we would be blessed. We identify "blessings" as material things and consumer goods.

But in Christian scripture the word “blessing” instead means God’s favor, *not our favor*, often called “grace” or “abundance.” In reading the Beatitudes, we can read it as, “God’s favor is to the poor” or “God’s grace is to the poor.”

Jesus is saying the opposite of what our society defines as blessings. In the Kingdom of God, a blessing is not a self-centered idea, but favor to all those at the bottom of society, the poor, the powerless, the bullied, the disabled, the weak, the transgendered, the illegal immigrants trying to find safety, and all those who are scared. The underdogs of society are favored by God. And from the insight of one of our Vestry member, that includes all of us who live in vulnerability.

At the time of Jesus’ pronouncement, this was radical theology. It wasn’t only radical, it would eventually be the cause of Jesus’ death. This is radical theology even today. How often do we elevate the powerful and rich in society and discard the poor?

Father Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation calls these “Be-attitudes,” because they’re the attitudes we should have. Jesus was telling the people, ‘Everything that you have been taught to believe by your ancestors, by the religious authorities, by society at large is wrong.’ The people of Jesus’s day believed that if you were rich, if you were

powerful, if you had success and prestige and good health, well, then God was rewarding you. You are God's highly favored ones because look at your prosperity.

And conversely, they believed if you were poor and hungry and sick, then God was punishing you. Because obviously you or your ancestors were sinners. You must of done something wrong. You were not God's highly favored. You are not worthy of God's love.

Doesn't this theology sound familiar even in our world today?

However, Jesus boldly says the complete opposite. He takes what they believed, and he flips it on its head. He's says, 'No, it's just the opposite – the poor and the hungry, and the sick and the persecuted – they're God's highly favored ones, not you. And he's saying the kingdom belongs to them, not you. They're poor and sick, not because of God, but because of you. That's why they're poor and sick and hungry, because of you.

Our pride can often get in the way of what is more important to Jesus. It is helpful to remember God's word in Micah 6:8, "O people, the Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: **to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.**"

So, in reading the Beatitudes, how can we apply it to our lives?

We can ask ourselves, how much of what society has become is due to how we treat others in order to protect what we have? In order for us to have inexpensive clothing and food, do we turn a blind eye to child labor and third world working conditions? When we want to deport illegal immigrants and yet still have low priced produce, are we being hypocritical? We can not have the year of jubilee if we only care about ourselves. This is what the BE-attitudes is all about.

It's a good time for us to look at who we are aligned with in in this world. Are we aligned with the rich and the powerful? Do we care more about maintaining the status quo, making sure that we're protected, that our retirement funds are protected, that we have good health care? *Or* do we have a heart that shares? Are we concerned about others who have less than us? Are we concerned that everyone should have affordable good health care? Are we concerned about everyone's safety and security? Being a Christian in 2025 requires us to be aware of our local, state and federal government legal policies. We can use our voting power for a jubilee society.

God's rule over the world and the spiritual realm does not happen after Christ returns. Jesus is not coming back to build the kingdom for us. He's calling us to partner with him to build the kingdom together. The Second Coming of Christ happens through us. So let's be people of the BE-attitudes. Let's BE people who actively bring about the kingdom of heaven here on earth by selflessly caring for those who need our help.

Amen.