

Sermons from West Denmark



West Denmark Lutheran Church Luck, Wisconsin westdenmark.org

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany February 1, 2026

A Sermon by Christy Wetzig, Parish Associate

Matthew 5:1-12

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

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

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when others 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 so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

When I heard a story a couple weeks ago, I thought right away of Paul's words we just read, about the small things putting to shame the great things in this world. (1 Corinthians 1:18-31)

Dr. Freeman Hrabowski, president emeritus of the University of Maryland, told of his experience in the Children's March in Birmingham in 1963. He was 12 years old, a bright kid, and sick of tattered, graffitied books handed down from the white schools. He had heard of this march for equal education, and he begged his parents to let him participate. At first they said no, but after a night of tearful, fraught discussion, in the morning they told him he could go. So he marched with the children, and he met the Birmingham chief of police, who asked him why he was marching. Freeman said, "Sir, I want to go to a good school and get a good education." The man picked him up and threw him into the police van.

Freeman spent nearly a week in jail. Every night the guards would come into the cells and beat the children. He could hear their cries, but whenever a guard came near his cell, he led his cellmates in saying the 23rd Psalm, and the guards kept away from them. Every day, he could hear the parents outside the jail, singing and praying for their children. When they were finally released, public opinion had swayed, and the Civil Rights Act was signed into law the next year. It took the children to reveal what was evil in the law. It took the weak things to shame what was strong. It took those who hungered and thirsted for righteousness. In the kingdom of heaven, Paul writes, God chooses the foolish things to shame the wise. God chooses the meek and the lowly, and through them, God does great things.

That's where Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount—that great outline of the kingdom of heaven, which, he had been saying, had come near. The Sermon on the Mount is sort of like the second Ten Commandments. And it does seem like Matthew is trying to draw parallels between Jesus and Moses—some overly astute Biblical scholars (like Shawn last week) have noticed that Matthew divides Jesus' teachings into 5 chunks, which is also, coincidentally, the number of the books of Moses. Perhaps Matthew is connecting Jesus to Moses. And just like Moses went up onto a mountain to receive the Law, here is Jesus, strapping on his crampons.

The Law of Moses established the first kingdom of Israel, centered on the Temple, God's presence in the world. It was governed by laws of purity meant to separate the people of Israel from the rest of the world, to keep it worthy to house God on earth, and to placate a just and jealous God.

And now Jesus has just been preaching that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near. Is this the same kingdom as Moses'? It seems different...but how?

The first difference we notice is that while Moses went up on the mountain alone (and the penalty for even touching the mountain while God visited him there was immediate death), when Jesus goes up on the mountain he brings his disciples too. He had gone there really for the same reason Jesus often goes into the wilderness—for some peace and quiet. However, by the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the crowds have found him. "The crowds," it says at the end, "were astonished at his teaching." I like to think that as Jesus was giving this long discourse, the word was spreading, and people kept arriving, in little groups, breathless from their climb, and they settled down enjoying the cool reprieve of altitude, and they passed his words along, until

the little kingdom of 12 Jesus began teaching had become that astonished crowd. No longer holy and unapproachable, the birthright of some elite club, Jesus welcomes all into the new kingdom—the children that came along with their parents, the sick and lame hoping to be healed, the poor, the lonely, the searching, all who wanted to followed Jesus up that mountain.

I wonder what the crowds thought as they heard Jesus preach. I think it would have been disconcerting, because instead of relaxing Moses' law, Jesus tightens it. He takes the law which Israel failed in every instance to follow, and he makes it even more stringent, more impossible. He says things like "You have heard it said 'Do not murder' but I say to you, if you even get angry with your fellow, you deserve the same judgement as a murderer." He continues with rigid, exacting rules concerning divorce, swearing, purity. (This is where he says "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.") Here is also where he says things like turn the other cheek and pray for your enemies and give them your cloak and don't you think it's way too much to ask?

If these are the rules for the new kingdom of heaven, then we might as well kiss it goodbye before it's even begun. Even if these are just the rules for the tiny kingdom of heaven that is any faithful home, or the slightly larger one that is this church, or the bigger one that is our village, nation, or world. Do you ever feel like things are impossible? Like the world is too broken to be fixed, so far lost as to be irretrievable? Do you ever feel like nothing you do is right, or good enough? Like the kingdom of heaven Jesus speaks about must be some future heavenly paradise because what we have on earth is nothing but an empire of evil and crooks and carnage?

The first of the Ten Commandments is this: "You shall have no other gods besides me," and this, perhaps, is the most important commandment. What is Jesus' opening line? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And this, I think, is the most important line of the Sermon on the Mount.

I don't think Jesus is making a virtue of poverty. Instead he's saying, "You know how people sit on the streets and beg for money because they're utterly destitute? That's how I want you to feel about your standing before God. They don't have status or possessions or even the comfort of knowing that they're righteous—they have nothing on their own, and they know it. You too have no righteousness of your own, nothing to justify yourself in God's eyes—you're absolutely dependent on God." One commentator calls this Beatitude the most perfect statement of God's grace in the Bible.

What the first law taught us, and maybe it taught God this too, is that we can't measure up to righteousness. So Jesus begins his new kingdom with grace.

Jesus continues blessing. "You know how it feels to mourn someone you've lost? That's how you should feel about sin, when the covenant with God is broken." It's only those who feel pain that realize that something needs to change. It's only those who sorrow over the brokenness of their lives, their home, their world who do anything about it. Are you disturbed by injustice? Do

you grieve over the state of the world? That's good, Jesus says. Take heart! You won't have to sorrow forever. Evil will not win. I have overcome the world.

You know that time you were so hungry your belly hurt and all you could do was think about food? You know that time you had forgotten to bring water and you got dizzy and your mouth was dry and the thought of cool rushing water tormented you with longing? That's how much a desire for justice should consume you, Jesus says. And he promises that you won't have to long forever. The scholars call this the divine passive: You will be filled. Those who long for justice won't be able to fill themselves. No matter how hard they work they won't usher in the perfect kingdom of God—God will bring the kingdom into the world; God will fill their longing for justice, and fill them to overflowing.

Jesus begins with grace. He calls us to full participation in the new kingdom of heaven, we're called to a life of righteousness and pursuit of justice; we're called to turn the other cheek and pray for our enemies and give them our cloaks and he knows it's way too much to ask. He knows we will mess this up. He knows it's impossible. That's why he opens with "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God." He's reminding us that we bring nothing to this beautiful, impossible kingdom, and to those who open their hands, saying, "I have nothing to offer," he puts into their empty hands the key to the kingdom of God. Theirs is the kingdom of God. Present tense, not future. It already belongs to you. The kingdom of God isn't a reward, as if you have done something to deserve it, as if you've scrupulously obeyed every commandment of God and made yourself worthy to house God on earth; the kingdom of God belongs to you now, simply as a consequence of who you are, a dependent of God's.

We act this out every time we come to this rail. We kneel here and open our empty hands, and did you ever stop to notice that this is exactly the position of a beggar? We should bring a tattered cardboard sign that says: "Anything helps." We should bring a sleeping bag and camp out at this rail, waiting. When we come, we hold out our empty hands and we wait for them to be filled. We put out our empty cup—we hold it up, this is what I have to offer—nothing; and we wait for it to be filled. And Jesus puts into our hands the key to the kingdom of heaven, crumbly and still warm from the oven, our cups dripping and overflowing and staining the carpet. And we are filled with exactly what we needed all along: himself.

And so we have everything it takes to bring the kingdom of heaven into the world.