

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven
February 1, 2026

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

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

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

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

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

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

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

“Blessed are you when people 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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” ~Matthew 5:1-12

I had cued up one of my very favorite old stories for last Sunday, and then we got 16 inches of snow. At first, I didn't want to let the story go, and so I found myself on Monday and part of Tuesday trying to shoehorn the story into this week's homily. And then Tuesday afternoon on the way home from school I stopped, after hearing an echo of a cherished voice from the past. It was my old preaching professor David Bartlett saying, as he said to me a couple of times twenty years ago with his characteristic warm smile, “Sometimes we need say to ourselves, ‘That's a good story for another sermon.’” Yes. And then I heard something else he loved to say. “Friends, sometimes you're already surrounded by story.” Yes indeed. And this is one of those weeks when we are surrounded by story. We're surrounded by the story of our moment. We're steeped in its many stories, some very hard for us, some bewildering, even heartbreaking. We also behold the story of this beloved place on this day in this year as we prepare to meet today and gather as a family. And of course we also behold the extraordinarily rich stories before us today from Matthew and Paul and Micah that speak so poignantly and vividly into all of the stories that surround us.

So let's take the gospel story first. We just heard verses from Matthew known as *The Beatitudes* that many could say almost by heart. We tend to hear and see them as signature teachings or sayings, a deeply beautiful list of declarations. *Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the peacemakers.* And they are. But even more, they are *story*; they are raw, real vivid story, and I want to suggest that when we hear them as story we can hear them speak in a new way and let them speak with all their raw power into our moment. Jesus, we've learned in this story, has been wrestling with his sense of call in the violent and volatile world he's come to inhabit. It's a brutal world where a tiny few have means and call the shots. All of them. Discussion or dissent is stifled, silenced or eliminated. He's been figuring out his call knowing that he has truth to speak into this world. He also knows that he'll pay a steep price for speaking that truth; that he will ultimately be among those silenced and eliminated. But he'll speak it anyway because he knows it's a truth that can and will heal the world. And so he launches his ministry; a ministry of healing for the world. He recruits a few who might join him in this work of healing and love and truth. We call them the disciples. Some are men, some are women; all navigate life in a world that confounds and bewilders them, where lies are called truth and wrong is called right. And just as soon as he has the chance, he speaks to them, speaks a word into this world, and here's what he says. Honored are you, he says, when you

make peace in a world that knows no peace. Honored are you, he says, when your spirit and soul are crushed in a soulless world. Honored are you, he says, when you hold on your integrity when it would be so much easier to give it away. Honored, blessed are you, he says, when you grieve what you know has been lost; when despite all of this you somehow keep on living lives of mercy. And of kindness. Of peace and justice. Honored, he says, are you.

It's twenty years later when Paul speaks from *another* time and place and from another story into ours. As he engages his own ministry of love and healing he winds up in a glitzy town known as Corinth. There's lots of money to be made there. It's loud and exciting but there's a hollowness at its heart. It too is soulless yet there are a small few trying to find their way out and to make a pathway for others. Paul wants to help them. Their hearts are in the right place but they've devolved into cliquishness and factions. They're divided. They speak loudly but over each other. They have trouble listening and they fail to hear one another. They're at risk of losing their way. And into all of this, Paul will speak an image; the image of a body. You are a body, he will say, and a body is made up of myriad members no one of which is more significant or important or vital to the body than any other. It's a beautiful and affecting image and it changes their hearts. Ultimately he'll say some things to them that continue to re-echo even today. *Love is patient*, he will say. It's kind. It bears the other. It listens more than it speaks. It bears the burdens of others. It does its best to imagine what it might be like to walk in another's shoes. And in this noisy, belligerent world, Paul says, it alone survives. It alone endures. All else will pass, Paul says, so live *as this body*. Walk together. Walk humbly together with your God, doing justice and loving mercy.

That's his story and of course it's another as well. We know it from the words of the prophet Micah and they are beautiful words indeed. Beautiful enough to serve as a signature verse for many us — for people and places and even parishes. They've been ours. We carry them on our heart and they remind us as powerfully as any few words can of the essence of our call. We've been shown, Micah says, what is good and what's desired of us. And just what is that? Well here it is, Micah says: to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Powerful words and perhaps *even more powerful* when heard as story. Micah accepted a call from God to speak truth into the world, to serve as prophet, to listen for God's voice and to let us, God's people, hear God's word. We've always counted on truth-tellers to anchor us, to sustain us and to get us through, Micah heard God say, to help us make sense of the world. But the truth-tellers no longer tell the truth. Those entrusted with the power to help and heal use it instead to exploit and steal. Micah's story is a story set in a time of bewilderment and grief. And yet into all of that he offers his indelible word of hope. There is a way out, he says! Don't give up. Walk with God. Keep on offering love, mercy, peace; keep on living lives of justice, of integrity, of steadfast, relentless hope. God walks with you. There is hope. *Love will win*.

And so my friends we arrive at this day, in this time and in this place, as we stop for a moment to reflect on our own story, even just briefly and to ask how *these stories* breathe life and light and truth and even some hope and peace into ours. How do we, in our own time of bewilderment, when hearts break all around us only to be broken again, walk from this place knowing just how we might, each of us and all of us, walk steadfastly with our God, breathing hope, healing hearts, loving justice? How do we walk from this place where we indeed do live as a body, celebrating and cultivating it, knowing we are linked to every member of it — how do we walk from this place ready to reconcile, to re-link, to restore and to heal?

Maybe, today's stories suggest, we start as those first few did, those persons of faith strong enough in their sense of God's call to rise up and follow, to join and build a ministry of healing; maybe we start as they did by hearing the words of the one who loved us into life, the one who came to us in a time of utter darkness and said, *Honored are you who bring light. Honored are you who breathe peace. Blessed are you who do the hard work of grieving and the hard work of truth-telling and of peacemaking, the hard work of forgiving, of walking in another's shoes, of listening, of bearing one another, of living lives shot through with the love that knows no end, no limit, no bounds.* This is the story that can become our story and maybe even fill up our hearts again as we remember that *we know* this story ends in love, in the inextinguishable, transfiguring love of the one who gave himself to us freely and completely in love and in whom, and in whose love, we find our hope, our strength, our call and our eternal joy. Thanks be to God.