

4th Sunday after The Epiphany

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on February 8, 2026

Micah 6:1-8 / 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 / Psalm 15 / Matthew 5:1-12

*Speak in our hearts, O Lord, and say, "Seek my face."
When we hear Your Word, O Lord, Your face will we seek.*

Imagine a troubled society.

- A land occupied by military forces. (Roman Empire)
- Corrupt religious authorities complicit with government. (Sadducees & Pharisees)
- Innocent peaceful people killed for speaking out against the King. (JtB)
- Concentration of wealth and disregard for the poor and needy.
- Rampant corrupt business practices (moneychangers in the Temple).

All these were aspects of the context in which Jesus spoke The Beatitudes and the context in which Matthew remembered and recorded the story a couple of decades later. All of it was unimaginable, untenable and unacceptable to God's plan. It is in this oppressive, corrupt and violent society that Jesus uplifts those who, by their lowly status within that society, are blessed by God.

His matter-of-fact way of lifting up the lowest of society must have been shocking and bewildering for the crowds gathered atop the mountain. When their world around them was all about taking power by force, why wasn't Jesus declaring the rich and influential as blessed, or better yet, those who fed into the demands of the powerful, why weren't they included in the blessed?

Matthew's community was just as fraught as those who heard the Sermon on the Mount. In some ways, their societal context was more fraught, shortly after the Fall of Jerusalem. Not only did they have tensions with Jewish leaders who didn't consider them faithful Jews, they had tensions with one another, and the

community was fracturing. And in both times – when spoken on the Mount and when heard by Matthew’s community of Jewish-Christians – Jesus bursts into the intense theological and political debate raging between the parties of the day.

We are in a similar place. And it’s all happening a lot faster and more intensely for us because of a 24/7 news cycle and the ever-presence of social media.

- Parts of our country and our state are or have been occupied by military forces. ICE agents will be deployed *en masse* in California during the Super Bowl in Santa Clara.
- White Christian Nationalists have fully wedded themselves to political power.
- Innocent peaceful protesters were murdered for speaking out against our government, being martyred alongside our unarmed Black and Brown neighbors who continue to be murdered by law enforcement without justification.
- We are experiencing a concentration of wealth and disregard for the poor and needy unlike we have ever seen in the US.
- And the corrupt business practices that were once secreted in the C-Suites and golf courses are on full public display with impunity.

It is all unimaginable, untenable and unacceptable to God’s plan. It has made me fearful and angry. Yet Jesus says:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful and meek.

And my natural response is:

What the heck! You want me to be peaceful, merciful and meek?

But that’s *not* what Jesus is saying, at least not to me. To *me*, Jesus is saying:

Ian, you're too fearful and angry to be characterized by The Beatitudes. I'm not instructing you to be poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful or meek. I'm drawing your attention so that you see the poor in spirit, the peaceful, the merciful and the meek. Channel your fear and anger on their behalf.

We often see The Beatitudes as instructions for a life blessed by God, and we look for role models or just take them in as nice and warm words of Jesus and find ways to structure our lives in such a way that we can exhibit these characteristics. Yet, we know that they are impossible to live up to, so I'm just going to get on with my life!

But Jesus isn't instructing us; He is *showing* us that the poor in spirit, the peaceful, the merciful, and the meek are in our midst and have a future in the Kingdom of God, when the evil of today has ended and God's Reign of love and justice prevails. And those of *this* time who will feature in that age are at *this* time "blessed."

Thanks Jesus. So, where does that leave me? Just fearful and angry? Perhaps. But maybe God is pointing out the *blessed* in my midst so I will channel my anger to support and protect them.

We completely misunderstand The Beatitudes if we think that to be blessed is to be happy or satisfied or content. To be blessed is "*to be set apart*". In the Jewish context of Jesus' words and Matthew's writings, those deemed "blessed" in The Beatitudes are those who are – in this age – set apart for the Age to Come when God's reign of peace and love subdues the violence and corruption of the present age.

Take, for example, those who mourn. They aren't those who are sad because of the death of loved ones. In a Jewish theological context, what it meant to mourn was more encompassing. Those who mourn are those who know that the present age is far from a reflection of the Image of God. They see idolatry, injustice,

exploitation, and violence, and they mourn. And they are blessed, set apart to be comforted when God's peace and love eventually prevail.

I mourn in this way, and whether or not I am among the "*blessed are those who mourn*", I see the see idolatry, injustice, exploitation, and violence, and I mourn and I am fearful and angry. But even if God has set me apart to mourn the present age, where do I place my anger at what I see around me?

Aristotle wrote:

*Anybody can become angry, that is easy; but to be angry with the right person, and to the right degree, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way, that is not within everybody's power, that is not easy.*¹

To do that requires *Righteous Anger*. YHWH in the OT quite often expressed anger and wrath. But so did some of the OT characters, like Moses when he came down from Mount Sinai with the 10 Commandments and the Israelites had built and were worshiping a golden calf. Or Jonah who was angry at God forgiving the evil Ninevites. Jeremiah expressed YHWH's anger at the Israelites for their evildoing. Jesus, too, expressed anger: when He overturned the moneychangers' tables in the Temple, when the Disciples tried to shoo away the children, and when Peter cut off the ear of the soldier. Anger has a time and a place, as Aristotle wrote. Reflecting on Aristotle's wisdom on anger, I see *Righteous Anger* this way:

- *To be angry with the right person is to be angry at an abuser or oppressor.*
- *To be angry to the right degree is to be able to effect positive change in the situation.*
- *To be angry at the right time is to not be late to the game or to jump the gun.*
- *To be angry for the right purpose is to want to work toward love and peace.*

¹ <https://diowestmo.org/righteous-anger/>

- *To be angry in the right way is to use the resources available to you and the networks that can support the change needed.*
- *And, as Aristotle rightly says, that is not in everyone's power, that is not easy.*

That is why – in times of community and societal strife – we band together. We come together in our anger and we organize. We think through Aristotle's plan and God's purpose for us, and we get all of the elements together. That is our calling, and that is our right to peaceful assembly. We channel our *Righteous Anger* and get in *Good Trouble*.

St John Chrysostom – 4C Bishop of Constantinople and present at many of the Ecumenical Councils – put anger another way that helps channel our anger toward *Righteous Anger*:

He that is angry without cause, shall be in danger; but he that is angry with cause, shall not be in danger: for without anger, teaching will be useless, judgments unstable, crimes unchecked.

The *cause* for righteous anger must be to combat injustices, unstable judgments and unchecked crimes being inflicted upon the vulnerable or the masses. *Righteous Anger* must teach us and the oppressors something, hopefully about the love of God and love of neighbor...not love of self. *Righteous Anger* must address crimes against humanity and Creation. *Righteous Anger* requires a dimension of love². *Righteous Anger* must move us toward the Kingdom of God.

Tod Lindberg, an American political expert and current Fellow at the right-wing Hudson Institute, wrote the article "*What the Beatitudes Teach*" for the conservative journal *Policy Review* and pointed out that Jesus'...

² *Anger* Oxford Companion to Christian Thought, Adrian Hastings

...political agenda is thus organized around the pursuit of righteousness by those who are able – at potential risk of their own lives – for the sake of a world in which the unvalued (including they themselves when they are persecuted) are at last fully valued as human beings.³

It is a risk quoting someone as conservative as Lindberg, but he *is* correct. His conclusion that follows unfortunately relies on the false premise that, for the unvalued to gain agency, the powerful lose it. But let's hold onto how he encapsulates the meaning of The Beatitudes in modern political language. Jesus' political view is where our *Righteous Anger* should be directed and what it should lead to: *the unvalued are at last fully valued as human beings.*

For us and for the hearers of The Beatitudes, life may be difficult now, but blessed are those who mourn. Those who mourn the current state of affairs and direct their *Righteous Anger* toward a society that reflects the Image of God cannot be complacent: they must be and are hopeful! Jesus says that they will be *comforted*, that their hope will not be in vain. If that hope is squarely focused on Christ, we know the possibility of a future in which justice, mercy and humility – the qualities that Micah calls us to – will prevail. And that's where Lindberg's pessimism that the future will fall at the hands of the *blessed* who become the oppressors fails. God's Realm will not be just another oppressive realm, for it will be a realm of justice, mercy and *humility* before God. *That* will let *all* experience and know the peace and love of God and God's Realm.

And we start with compassion – not pity; not sympathy – *compassion: suffering with and empathy: suffering in*. White Christian Nationalists will have you believe in 'sin of empathy' so that they can justify exploitation and violence in Christian terms. But it's fabricated BS. There is no 'sin of empathy' in Jesus' Realm. God's love and peace are undergirded by our compassion and empathy toward one another. Compassion and empathy unite both kindred spirits and ardent foes, and

³ <https://www.hoover.org/research/what-beatitudes-teach>

that is not what the powerful, privileged and established of this age want. They don't want us to unite – they want us to remain divided. They cannot accept that – witnessed throughout scripture – God chooses to be on the side of the weak, the forgotten, the despised, the justice seekers, the peace makers and the persecuted because that takes away their power and privilege – but it doesn't take away their humanity.

The *Blessed* are those who are faithful to the *coming* of God's Kingdom of peace. In the midst of idolatry, exploitation and violence, *The Blessed* doesn't describe a bunch of happy-go-lucky stooges who are oblivious to the ills of today while they sing *Qué será será: Whatever will be will be*. The *Blessed* may suffer, but also live with the confidence that peace and love will win. Light will shine in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.

Aristotle tells us that *Righteous Anger* is not easy. Being a Christian isn't easy. And just like Christians in the United States today, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes represented a fractured Jewish leadership. They were arguing about the same issues that polarizes Christians in America now:

- Should we side with the aggressors?
- As people of God, what is our outward identity?
- In what ways (and whom) is God calling us in this environment?

The questions facing 1C Jewish sects helps me focus my anger toward *Righteous Anger*. For me, as a Christian, I cannot side with my government killing innocent protesters, just as much as I did not and cannot side with law enforcement killing unarmed black and brown persons.

- I'm going to side with the poor in spirit, the peaceful, the merciful, and the meek. They are all around us and in abundance.
- My Christian identity is going to be one that aligns with the Baptismal Covenant.

- And at a minimum, God is calling me to speak His Word into the chaos I am experiencing around me.

Blessed are we who mourn ... who mourn the state of our world today. If you are one who mourns, we have to hold onto the hope that we will be comforted. We must channel *Righteous Anger* to enable the poor in spirit, the peaceful, the merciful, and the meek to feel their blessedness. Live into the *other* message given today, one that long pre-dates The Beatitudes, a way to channel your fear and anger in righteous ways:

God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what the Lord requires of you:

To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.