

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Micah 6:1-8 Ps. 15 1 Cor. 1:18-31 Matt. 5:1-12

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Feb. 1, 2026

This morning we begin a three-week immersion into Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew, which encompasses the 5th, 6th and 7th chapters of his Gospel... that sermon laying out for Matthew's early Christian community in the last decades of the 1st century many ethical markers necessary for shaping their lives in the pluralistic society in which they lived...

Caught in challenging debates with their Jewish siblings, not to mention the difficult questions of how to deal with the Gentiles and the Roman authorities, Matthew seeks in his Sermon on the Mount to answer such questions as, "How should we respond to a brother or sister who does us wrong?" "How should we relate to our enemies?" "What should we do if we see a speck in our neighbor's eye?"

Over the next few weeks, as our Gospel texts take us through parts of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, we will hear some hard ethical sayings; many "Do this-s" and "Don't do that-s." Many of them seemly impossible to fulfill, like loving your enemy, and turning the other cheek, and giving your coat to anyone who asks...

Three weeks of what sounds to be just a bunch of commanding do's and don'ts, tempting us perhaps to just stay home with a hot cup of coffee and the weekend edition of the "New York Times..."

Unless that is, we understand that Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, beginning as it does with the Beatitudes.... (Let me say that again... beginning as it does with the Beatitudes), seeks to offer a possibility similar to the one poet Marion Goldstein speaks of in her poem "Redemption" which begins with these lines...

Redemption

*Three thousand Beluga Whales
are entombed
under a ceiling of ice
in the tundras of freezing fields.
In the luminosity of living
It is hard to hear a warning

blasting from the horn
of the Russian trawler...*

The poet then describing the bellowing of the trawler's captain as he tries to further warn the Beluga Whales of the ice ceiling which will soon solidify around them, entombing them for good, his bellowing from the ship's bridge "lost," as the poet writes... his bellowing "lost in thin air."

*But ah, the poet continues,
A sailor with a phonograph
Is climbing into the bridge*

*And from the throat of the ship's speaker
Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is floating
like grace
over the growing grave.
Notes lassoed by the wind
harness the herd
following the great hulk of metal
like the Good Shepherd
leading them home.*

OK. Just in case you're wondering what the connection between Marion Goldstein's poem "Redemption" and Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (beginning as it does with the Beatitudes) might be, let me just remind you that Matthew was a Jew, intent on helping his predominately Jewish Christian community see in Jesus the fulfillment of God's vision or dream... a vision that runs throughout the Hebrew Scriptures... a vision of shalom, peace, and well-being for all of creation rooted in mercy and justice and righteousness...

As our Gospel texts this year will primarily be from Matthews' account of Jesus' life, we will see instances of Matthew reaching back into the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures again and again to show the many ways in which Jesus gave meaning, substance, heart, body and

soul to the prophecies and the promises chronicled in those ancient texts...

So think for a moment about a character from the Hebrew Scriptures who also climbed a mountain, and from whose heights delivered to the people a prescription for living that would shape their lives in the world... Who would that be?

Moses... Moses, known in large part for delivering from atop Mt. Sinai the Ten Commandments to the People of Israel; a covenant by which they might come to learn how to live lives of authenticity, integrity, wholeness, fullness and openness in relationship to God and one another...

Moses, known primarily for delivering that ethical guideline to the People of Israel as they trudged through the wilderness to the Promised Land... (an ethical guideline, by the way, that religious people down through the centuries have often made into a large stick of “do’s” and “don’ts” with which to beat others over the head)....

But **how do we so easily forget** that Moses’ first and most brilliant calling was the call to liberate his people from Egyptian bondage on behalf of the God of steadfast love and mercy? **How do we so easily forget** that the first of the Ten Commandments, which serves to introduce the others, starts with those beautiful words of belonging, “I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other Gods before me... I am the Lord **your** God... I am yours, and you are mine”?

How do we so easily forget that in both leading the people to freedom **and** in teaching the people how to live lives in the context of that God-given freedom (a freedom counter to the seductive, market-driven, oppressive, violent ways of Pharaoh’s Egypt), Moses was

“climbing into the bridge with a phonograph, and from the throat of the ship’s speaker was playing Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, where it floated over the growing grave, its notes lassoed by the wind, harnessing the herd like the Good Shepherd and leading them home?”

How do we so easily forget that both the liberating and the teaching to which Moses was called were intended to lead the People of Israel into lives of “righteousness?” Righteousness as defined not by an ability to follow the letter of the law in a list of rigid “do’s” and “don’ts”, but by being anchored in God’s own aliveness; making salvation and redemption not about “following the rules” but, as our beloved friend Cynthia Bourgeault would say, about **“an intensity of connection”... an intensity of connection with the creator, liberator, lover God and with the world God so loves...**

Matthew wanted his early Christian community to see Jesus as the new Moses, the new liberator, the new teacher... Jesus, who in the Sermon on the Mount, climbed the mountain with a phonograph and from its heights played Beethoven’s Ninth, calling his disciples and those who would listen out from under the ceiling of ice in the tundras of their frozen lives into a life of righteousness, a life of fullness in God, a life with an intensity of connection to the source of steadfast love and mercy, justice, compassion, and peace...

Beginning with those beautiful words we call the Beatitudes, declaring from the beginning of Jesus’ ethical teaching in Matthew, that it’s not about following a list of do’s and don’ts, but about the possibility of a fullness of life born from an intensity of love... It’s about an invitation to live in the presence of the kingdom of heaven already dawning in the person and in the way of Jesus...

Notice... there are no imperative verbs, no commands in the Beatitudes; there are only indicative verbs... **verbs that indicate a way of being that will lead to a way of living that will open to a way of knowing God's presence in our midst, on earth as it is in heaven...**

The Beatitudes are not commands. They are statements of what is already true with the coming of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us; already true for those who follow Jesus, the way of Jesus, **not as a reward for good behavior, but as a consequence of a certain kind of living...** "Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers..."

"Blessed," *makarios* in Greek, also meaning happy, fortunate... "It's like this," I always told my confirmation students, "Blessed are they who take a bath, for they shall be clean"...

Or to use the two beatitudes one of my Scandinavian grandmothers lived by, "Blessed are they who cut coupons out of every newspaper in Chicagoland, and then drive all over tarnation to use those coupons, for they shall save five cents" ... And, "Blessed are they who take one tablespoon of cod live oil every day, for they shall be regular" ...

Or, to use a beatitude I wish I had taken to heart when I had the chance... the beatitude Michael often recited to me on Saturday afternoons in summer when I was sitting at my desk working on a sermon, "Elaine, he would say, in so many words, "blessed are they who go out on a sailboat on such an afternoon, for they shall be overcome by the beauty of it all" ...

The Beatitudes, which serve to introduce Jesus' ethical teachings in Matthew's Gospel, mean to **indicate a life of blessing that flows as a consequence** of a life of loving, of caring, of showing mercy, of peacemaking, of following the way of Jesus, who in turn reveals the heart of God... And these Beatitudes mean to sound like

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony floating

like grace

over the icy graves of our fear-filled,

closed and self-righteous lives...

notes lassoed by the wind,

harnessing our hearts

and leading us home.

The thing is, as the life of Jesus made clear, this "life of blessing" isn't a life of ease or "success"... It doesn't leave us well-situated, intact, and resting on our laurels... A truth of which I have been reminded a number of times...

But especially so on the Sunday in January every three years (like today) when Matthew's Beatitudes comes around in the lectionary again... Because it brings to mind for me a funeral I did one Friday afternoon in January almost twenty ago for a 31 year-old man named Aaron who had died a few days earlier of a brain aneurism.

I didn't know Aaron, but learned from his family that he was famous for his race car driving, which he learned to love from his father

out on Speedway 95 just south of Bangor. Araon was also known for his wild streak, for his temper, for his OUIs, for his time in jail, for the life-force inside him that he had trouble controlling...

I knew all this before the day of the memorial service. I knew this would not be your typical "Lutheran" gathering. And I figured, along with the funeral director, that with the near blizzard conditions of the day, there would be few people...

So about a half hour before the service began they began to file in, shaking the snow off their blue jean jackets, their Speedway 95 hats, their black leather boots, their Pennzoil t-shirts, their mini-skirts, and their tattooed arms, if you know what I mean... 175 of them, tooling into the parking lot of Brooking Smith Funeral Home in their plow trucks and their pick-ups... indicating to me that I had no idea what I was in for...

But I led the service, playing the CDs the family had chosen for the occasion... The Beatles' "It's a Long and Winding Road"... Helen Reddy's "It's You and Me Against the World." I offered some prayers and a few words about Aaron and about God's strong love in the face of brokenness and loss and death. And then I opened the floor up to sharing, as the family had asked me to do...

And in the presence of those 175 people. I heard testimonies from those who loved Aaron... testimonies to his incredible gift of racing and his ability to fix anything that had a motor... testimonies about how he could deck somebody one moment and invite them to take his car around the track the next... testimonies about how he stayed with people while they were coming down from a high on crack-cocaine...

And I will tell you there was a moment when I was waiting to see if anyone else wanted to speak... I was standing up there holding the microphone, looking out on all those people gathered to give thanks for one of their own... one who was as needful as any of us for grace and love...

And in that time, while I was waiting, there was this moment of absolute silence... absolute focused love... focused grief, focused yearning, focused presence of God in a way I had rarely known it...

And it undid me... as if every layer of protective skin I had grown, every layer of judgment I had so carefully tended, every separation I had invented between myself and those Pennzoil people was taken away... So much so, that I began thinking about seeing if they needed a chaplain out at Speedway 95...

It was a blessing beyond blessing... providing me with a new Beatitude... "Blessed is she who finds herself in the presence of Speedway 95 people gathered to mourn the loss of one they loved, for she shall be stripped of all pretense and self-righteousness...she shall be killed and made alive..."

...Such a blessing... Such an agonizingly beautiful blessing... The very same kind of blessing we are invited into by the Beatitudes as Matthew begins his teachings in response to questions such as, "How should we relate to our enemies?" and "How might the people of God live out of their identity as Christians?"

Because, you see, God longs only for our fullness of life lived in an intensity of connection with God and others, no exceptions... This is salvation... this is what saves us from ourselves and our small narrow worlds for the sake of love... this is what saves us from the icy graves of

our fear-filled, closed and self-righteous lives... This is what we call salvation... this is what we call redemption...

Listen, a sailor with a phonograph is climbing into the bridge... +... and his name is Jesus... and from the throat of the ship's speaker Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is floating like grace, notes lassoed by the wind to lead us out of our icy graves and into the heart of God...

And what Matthew is asking us in the whole of his Sermon on the Mount, which begins by the way, with the Beatitudes... (Those agonizingly beautiful blessings that aren't rewards, but only the consequences of living a life in the way of Jesus)... Matthew is asking, "In the sound of such music floating like grace over the icy of our growing grave, will we follow?"