



Fourth Sunday After Epiphany, Lectionary 4, Year A

Bishop Timothy Graham, Indiana-Kentucky Synod

Gospel Text – Matthew 5:1-12

Matthew 5:1-12

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

SERMON TEXT:

Dear ones, Grace and peace be to you from God our Creator and our Lord, Jesus Christ! Amen.

I bring greetings from the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, comprised of 166 congregations, eight campus ministries, and a fantastic staff. I am Bishop Timothy Graham, called to serve this Synod, and I am delighted to bring a word of hope to you this morning, on the fourth Sunday after Epiphany.

Friends and siblings in Christ, today the Word of God guides us to the very heart of our faith—like a GPS pointing us to one destination: the cross! Paul's message in 1 Corinthians is clear: the message of the cross is our foundation. But what does that mean for us—people who try to live righteously, but fall naturally into sin, power, status, security, and comfort in a world that values those same things, where it's ok? What does it mean to live as people shaped, saved, and sent by the absurd wisdom and power of the cross?

While it's tempting to approach this question with dread, let's do so with gospel courage and joy. God's Spirit moves among us, not to make us champions through our own strength or intellect, but to gather us as a people defined by the boundless, upside-down love made visible in Jesus' cross. It's like the time I tried to assemble a bookshelf without instructions—sure, I was clever

enough to manage. After a few hours, a handful of leftover screws, and a wobbly result, I realized my abilities weren't enough. Thankfully, God isn't calling us to build something impressive on our own; instead, God invites us to follow the pattern of Jesus' love, where even our wobbles are embraced and transformed.

This transforming love is at the heart of Micah's call for justice, kindness, and humility. As a child, I was told, "I don't want your excuses, just pick up your socks and dirty laundry." Similarly, Micah states, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good... do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God." God isn't interested in excuses or showy displays—no need for extravagant sacrifices or flashy acts. Most meaningful acts of faith are the ones performed quietly, without seeking attention. God longs for genuine justice, mercy, and humble relationships, which come alive through the cross!

This desire for an authentic relationship with God shows up repeatedly in Scripture. For example, Psalm 15 asks, "Who is allowed to dwell with God?" It's not about popularity, attendance, or appearing perfect. Instead, it's about those whose lives reflect honesty, compassion, and generosity. Following the cross involves restoring relationships—with God, others, and even ourselves. The cross guides us to that restoration!

This theme continues in the New Testament. Paul highlights both the paradox and promise of the cross in 1 Corinthians: "The message of the cross is foolishness... but to us, it is the power of God!" The cross is our foundation – the same cross that, through baptism, marks us as beloved and makes us God's children forever. On the cross, Jesus shows strength through weakness and wisdom through what may seem absurd. God lifts the humble, feeds the hungry, and welcomes the forgotten. The message of the cross isn't a ladder to success, but a path of humility, unconditional love, and holy foolishness.

The upside-down logic of the cross isn't just a theological idea – it shows up in our daily lives, even in 12-step programs. One saying goes, "Our best thinking got us here." Let that sink in for a moment. Much of life's chaos comes from our "best" ideas. But the cross demonstrates that even the chaos and disorder caused by our selfish thinking can be changed when God breaks our chains, opens new perspectives, and breathes new life into our tired bones.

We see this exact reversal at the heart of Jesus' teachings. As he stands on the mount, Jesus blesses those everyone else overlooks: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the persistent peacemakers and pesky merciful ones, the persecuted. That's the revolution! God's reign breaks out among the unnoticed, the mourners, and the peacemakers. Life shaped by

the cross is found here – not in the halls of power, but among those who dare trust God’s wild, upside-down Kingdom.

So, how are we to respond to this upside-down Kingdom each day? O Church, what are we called to do?

- Choose justice over indifference: Notice, listen to, and stand up for those who are marginalized, outcast, or have no voice.
- Practice costly forgiveness and reconciliation by letting go of old grudges, making amends, reaching out to forgive or for forgiveness, for the sake of our community.
- Be honest with ourselves before judging others. Seriously, take the log out of our own eyes before we take the speck out of others. Hold on to our integrity, even when it’s hard or unpopular. God’s grace is enough.
- Embrace humility instead of chasing status. Trust God’s declaration that our worth is found in Christ—not in possessions or achievements.
- Let generosity, not comfort, shape our Christian witness.

Living out the cross in our lives, we are called not just to follow Jesus to the cross, but also through it, dying to ourselves, which then leads us to the hope of the resurrection. By grace, through baptism’s promise and the shared bread and wine of communion, we become a community rooted in hope, justice, and hospitality—fed and empowered to serve.

Friends, this journey shapes everything we are and do—and what an incredible adventure it is! Every step, every challenge, draws us deeper into the heart of something truly life-changing, leading us to a conclusion that Paul himself celebrates: Boast in the Cross! In the end, as Paul reminds us, we don't brag about our resume, our piety, or our ministries. Our one boast—the heartbeat of our lives—is in the Lord: Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ making all things new (even stubborn people like me!)

Imagine the hope in this! With this profound truth in our hearts, let's boldly celebrate the message and power of the cross. Let's move forward with holy courage and a spark of grace-filled boldness—redeemed and beloved, called to serve others. Shine with unshakable hope, pursue justice eagerly, and overflow with joyful mercy as God's cross-shaped, ever-surprising community. The Spirit is on the move—let's join in this great and expectant work, for the life of the world, and for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.

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