

Sermon and Prayers for Sunday, January 29, 2023 + 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
Bishop William O. Gafkjen, Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA

**Prayer of the Day**

Holy God, you confound the world's wisdom in giving your kingdom to the lowly and the pure in heart. Give us such a hunger and thirst for justice, and perseverance in striving for peace, that in our words and deeds the world may see the life of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

**Matthew 5:1-12**

*Jesus opens the Sermon on the Mount by naming those who are blessed in the reign of God.*

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

<sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup>“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup>“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup>“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

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Grace, mercy, and peace be yours, dear people of God, from God our creator, through the Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Not long ago, a stoplight I pulled up behind a car with a license plate that read “BL3553D.” It took me a moment to realize that this was meant to read “BLESSED.”

On that same trip, I noticed three other cars that had bumper stickers that simply said, “Blessed,” usually in fancy script.

Grateful for folks who are able to claim being blessed and to let others know it, I couldn't help but wonder how each person would describe what they mean by “blessed.”

We use the word “blessed”, and other forms of it, in a variety of ways in daily life. We seek the blessing of others on decisions we make or endeavors we engage, suggesting that we seek their approval, permission, or support. We bless people when they sneeze. Sometimes we count our blessings, suggesting that blessings may be quantifiable.

In the end, what it means to be blessed probably depends on context, as well as who is seeking or doing the blessing and why.

It's interesting to note in today's reading from Matthew that the first thing Jesus teaches as he begins his public ministry is how to recognize blessedness.<sup>i</sup> The theologian David Lose notes that it's "not how to become blessed, or even to bless each other, but rather to recognize who is already blessed by God." As it turns out, those who are already blessed by God are not those we usually think of as blessed.

God calls blessed those who are dispirited, those whose circumstances oppress them, those who grieve. God calls blessed those who, amid their own challenging circumstances, reach out to offer mercy to others, do what they can to make peace and seek justice. God calls blessed those who are reviled and rejected for trying to do the right thing.

In other words, God blesses people who are too often unseen, overlooked, or undervalued in the world and in the rush of daily life.

The Greek word translated "blessed" in this passage is "makarios". In scripture, makarios is often used to describe close proximity to God.<sup>ii</sup> In other words, God draws near to those who are in need. God blesses them just as they are. And God walks with them – with us – in hope toward new, abundant, and lasting life.

We see this so clearly when Jesus descends from the mount to walk through the world proclaiming and embodying the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. All along the way, Jesus draws near to those who are considered lost or least, left out or left behind, those who are last or languishing. Jesus blesses them as they are and gathers their sorrow and suffering and sin into himself, into God's very self. Jesus blesses those in need as their – our – sin and sorrow and suffering drive him to the cross and the power of new, abundant, and eternal life pulls him from the tomb.

Still bearing the scars of our wounds the crucified and risen one still walks the world, drawing near to bless the unseen, overlooked, and undervalued ones, blessing those who hurt or hunger, those who are reviled and rejected...the kingdom of heaven come near.

We who have been washed in water and Word, marked with the cross and sealed by the Spirit, we who have died with Christ and raised to new life in Christ, we who are blessed by God, are invited by Jesus today, just as his first followers were invited, to recognize who God blesses and draw near to them right along with Jesus.

Can you imagine what it would be like when our congregations and communities became communities that regularly recognize that God comes where we least expect God to be in order to bless that which others refuse to bless, to love what the world won't love, to offer caring companionship and to walk together in hope toward new, abundant, and lasting life?

Can you imagine what would happen if whenever we leave worship or go out into our daily lives we went with eyes washed by the Word to see neighbors in any sort of need not as nuisance but as blessed, and drew near to them as God draws near?

I can. And I can imagine a world that finally sees that God's kingdom of forgiveness and grace and hope and peace is not some faraway fairy tale place, but is here, right now, blessing all people and creation.

Thanks be to God. Amen

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## Prayers of Intercession<sup>iii</sup>

Called together to follow Jesus, we pray for the church, the world, and all in need.

*A brief silence.*

Cultivate humility in your church. In gatherings of every size, teach us to boast only in the cross. Shape your church to be people of kindness, generosity, and justice. Merciful God,

**receive our prayer.**

The foundations of the earth bear witness to your faithfulness; the mountains and hills echo with your holiness. When we mistreat your creation, show us the error of our ways. Inspire us with reverent awe to honor all you have made. Merciful God,

**receive our prayer.**

You make foolish the wisdom of the world. Raise up honorable leaders who seek justice, love mercy, and pursue peace. Frustrate plans that are corrupt, wicked, and self-seeking. Prosper the work of peacemakers (*local and international reconciliation efforts may be named*). Merciful God,

**receive our prayer.**

Bless all whom the world rejects. Accompany those who are regarded as foolish, weak, low, and despised; reveal your power and presence at work where it is least expected. Give your life, strength, and wisdom to all in need (*especially*). Merciful God,

**receive our prayer.**

As with your people Israel, remind this congregation of your saving acts. Remind us how your faithfulness brought us through difficulties and sustained us despite our weaknesses. Establish the cross as the center of our life together. Merciful God,

**receive our prayer.**

*Here other intercessions may be offered.*

Praise to you for your blessed saints in every time and place (*especially*). Trusting you accompanied them in poverty, persecution, and in every trial, we trust you abide with your people always. Merciful God,

**receive our prayer.**

We bring to you our needs and hopes, O God, trusting your wisdom and power revealed in Christ crucified.

**Amen.**

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<sup>i</sup> This insight and a couple of others this sermon are adapted from David Lose: <https://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/epiphany-4a-recognizing-blessing/>

<sup>ii</sup> Ingrid Rasmussen, *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching (Year A 2023)*, p. 73.

<sup>iii</sup> Scripture reprinted and prayers adapted from Sundays and Seasons (<https://www.sundaysandseasons.com>)