

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost and 54<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
January 29, 2023**

**Matthew 5:1-12**

If there is a short way to summarize the Gospel of Jesus Christ, there would be no better way than the Sermon of the Mount, especially as it is presented in Matthew 5:1-7:28. The entire section begins with Jesus going up a mountain, and it ends with Jesus coming down the mountain. Important things happened to Jesus on mountains, and today we see one of those important events. Jesus saw the crowds, and decided to present to them what the ethic of the Kingdom looks like. The kingdom of God is the rule of God and when God rules in towns, cities, and nations the poor of spirit, those mourn, the meek and humble, those who hunger and thirst, those who are merciful and pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness are blessed. This is a kingdom of complete reversal, where those at the margins find themselves at the center of God's attention and love.

Jesus then extends these blessings or benedictions to his own disciples. He says, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." When these things happen, the disciples themselves will receive the benedictions of the Kingdom. They too will be like those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, and they too will receive the Kingdom of heaven. They will achieve a special relationship with God because, at the height of their persecution, they will be just like the prophets who came before them.

The Kingdom of Heaven will be a special relationship with God, as much as a reality in God's own presence. The disciples must then embrace their status as poor in spirit, which means to realize their dependance and their need for God at every point of their Journey. The poor in spirit realize that church is not about themselves and the satisfaction their needs, as much as it is about God and what God's Holy Spirit does for us and in us. It is about life in God's Spirit. A Church that doesn't draw their life source from God's own Spirit and the power of the Gospel, is a church centered on human precepts that don't have the power to save. It is a church based on the human spirit, on human needs, on human traditions, on our desperate need to have things always go our way. The human spirit tells you that everything is about you, church is about you, life is about you, you must always come first, the very existence of this community if to satisfy all your needs and desires. But a church based on the Spirit of God looks beyond our individual needs, and gives God the glory and honor for the life we share. We realize that it is all about God, and that we are here to serve him and to love him. We are here to draw from his Spirit the energy and strength we need to live honest lives in dishonest times, caring lives in careless communities, justice-driven lives in an unjust world. Blessed are you the poor in spirit because you, Saint Dunstan's, have realized your need for God in your lives, and you know our corporate life depends on him and no one else, but him.

Jesus says that those who mourn will be comforted, because we will realize that our lives are safe in God's hands. We realize that those who die are with the Lord who loves them and died for them. Our sufferings and afflictions will have a redemptive value we don't see, but we will see one day. God is with us and there is nothing that can separate us from his love. Those who mourn have the hope of restoration, health, and family reunions when our life on this earth is transformed. This is why those who mourn are comforted. They know there is a tomorrow awaiting us when today is done. You have been comforted this year, Saint Dunstan's, even though we have lost many of the pillars of our church. God has reminded us over and over that he is with us and that one day we will see our beloved brothers and sisters again. Those who mourn in the Christian faith, mourn with great hope. They know that God is the giver of all life and that our church will honor the legacy of those who leave us, while reaching out to a future that God has in place for us. We mourn, but the giver of all life will lead us the rest of the way.

Then Jesus says, blessed are the humble and meek, those who know that nothing we have was produced by us, was earned by us, or was caused by us. The humble know that everything is a gift from God. He gives us the rain and the sun, he gives us the harvest in due season, he blessed our human efforts and gives us the ability to create and imagine. We are the stewards of creation, what God has given us was given in trust for the care of our families and communities. The humble praises God with shouts of thanksgiving for all that they have, regardless of how much or how little. The humble places what he or she has at the service of God and his kingdom, starting with their own families and communities, and moving out from there. The humble practice radical generosity and hospitality because they know what they have is meant to be shared with the world, to the best of their ability. This humility covers wealth, but also friendship, care, wise counsel, time spent with others, the gift of relationships, and prayer. Saint Dunstan's has a humble church this last year. We have given from our time, our resources, and our counsel to our communities, to Hope Center Houston, to Lord of the Streets, to a wonderful restorative justice program for juveniles in Colombia, and to countless individuals who request assistance from our discretionary funds. We currently support the Seminary of the Southwest, Nam, and many other programs.

We have joined those who thirst and hunger for righteousness this year, for they will be filled, and we pray week after week for them from this lectern and in our own private prayers. I know that many of you are deeply involved in social causes that are dear to your heart, and I have joined your efforts at the Seminary of the Southwest, where I just finished a course on racial healing. We have seen the gruesome images of Memphis, we have seen similar images around the nation over the years, and most of us know deep in our hearts that we live in a world filled with hatred and violence. This church has joined the cries of those who thirst for justice, but there is still much that needs to be done. I ask you to continue to pray for Memphis and cities like it that are currently undergoing great injustice and pain. We have been merciful, and Jesus tells us that we too will one day receive mercy. Your church stands on the side of those who suffer, and we

lift their cries to heaven in corporate and personal prayer. I invite you to continue praying for our communities of Houston, Spring, Cypress and others. I also encourage you to continue to pray for our country and our world.

Jesus asks us today to be *the pure in heart*, which I believe means an internal inclination of our hearts. May we be predisposed to goodness, may we not harbor resentments, envy, and prejudice. May we stay away from hatefulness and the type of arrogance that divides churches, and sets to create a separation between classes, groups, ministries, or preferred activities. Those who love others for whom they are, regardless of quirks and differences, will see God in others and in everything. They will realize that they are completely surrounded by the divine. They see God behind every smile and every kind gesture. They see God behind the work of the Altar Guild and the dedication of our acolytes. They see God behind the efforts of the staff to provide a welcoming and inviting church and grounds. They see God behind the willingness of teachers to conduct Bible studies and home groups. They see God behind the leadership of the Vestry and the careful attention to finances of the Finance Committee. They see God behind the work of the Street of Shoppes and their scores of volunteers. They see God in everyone and everything. I believe saint Dunstan's has been pure in heart and predisposed to goodness this year. I believe there is more work to be done in this area, but I believe we are a community that truly loves each other. It has been an honor to watch you and to join you in efforts to bring others within God's saving embrace. I have noticed this in the creation of our ministries to Spanish speakers, and in our continued outreach efforts. 2022 has been a year of love freely given and freely received, and I am very proud of you.

Now, Jesus invites us to continue to be peacemakers, to work for reconciliation, and live out our baptismal covenant to respect the dignity of every human being. Churches that are peacemakers are filled with people who call themselves and others for "The children of God." And this is exactly what we are. We are God's children and we treat others as brothers and sisters in the Lord. We are not perfect, but we know we are loved perfectly, and out of gratitude, we seek to love others as he has loved us. This is the truest mark of a healthy church, the love and the respect we show each other and the world. Nothing of what we do in these building would matter at all, if we didn't love each other. We need to be radical in how much we care for each other. We much strive for the kind of church, where each is allowed to be who they are without fear or shame. This is the very definition of love. We hold you in our hearts not because you are perfect, but because the one who died for you is perfect, and in him we all will become perfect when we are refined by his Holy Spirit at the end of days.

Happy birthday, Saint Dunstan's! I am very proud of you, keep serving and loving. Keep praying and worshipping the Lord on whose benevolence our very lives depend. Keep caring for each other, using the resources God has given you to build his kingdom. And keep praying that God's kingdom may come among us in new and creative ways in 2023. May he, who is our very life, be with you. Amen!