

**Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany and Annual Meeting of the Parish
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
1 February 2026**

Matthew 5:1-12

When you go to an AMC theater around the world, you are greeted by Nicole Kidman in a small clip right after the previews for upcoming movies. I love this welcome. Kidman reminds all of us why we came to the movies on that day. She says, "We come to this place for magic. We come to AMC theaters to laugh, to cry, to care, because we need that, all of us. That indescribable feeling we get when the lights begin to dim and we go somewhere we've never been before. Not just entertained but somehow reborn together. Dazzling images on a huge silver screen. Sound that I can feel. Somehow heartache feels good in a place like this. Our heroes feel like the best part of us and stories feel perfect and powerful because here, there are. AMC Theaters, we make movies better."

If I were to think about the reasons why I go to church, I would have to mention some of the things Matthew tells us today in a passage that is unique to this Gospel. The Beatitudes in Matthew are some of the most radical, outrageous, and beautiful words ever written in Scripture. We need to hear the claims of these words today and every day because they remind us of the type of God we have and the type of Messiah God's Son is for us and for the world. We come to Saint Dunstan's for hope and inspiration. We come to listen enraptured to the many ways God has chosen to interact with the human race out of love and compassion. We come to see, to hear, to smell, to touch, and to feel a God who is imminently accessible to us in word and sacrament. We need this, all of us. That indescribable feeling we get when the opening hymn begins to play and we are reminded that for the next hour we will be in the real presence of God, who chooses to come alive in our midst. And we know that when we leave this place we will be reborn together, made a knew in the image of God. The dazzling images painted by Scripture, read aloud in the same way they have been read for thousands of years, words we can understand and feel, stories we have heard since we were in the cradle or since we chose to come to Christ. Heartache feels better in a place like this because here we know that we are not alone and that we are not orphaned. We meet our heroes, both those who are alive and in our midst, and those who have gone before us. Here we reconnect with the best part of us, with our dreams, our hopes, our desires, and our aspirations. Here we dare dream of a better and more just world. The Gospel of Jesus feels perfect and powerful because here, it is.

I come to church to hear that I am blessed, and this blessing has little to do with my performance or anything of value I can offer God. I am blessed even when I am “poor in Spirit” which in the first century included those who, regardless of wealth, had no honor in the society of the day. “The poor are those who suffer dishonor honor, who are socially weak, while the rich are the greedy, the shamelessly strong. Within the same context belong those persecuted unjustly and those reviled falsely. If persecution here means being driven out of their families, then it is no wonder that they are also hungry and mourning. They have lost their supporting system and are forced to beg for food. They are unable to maintain their inherited honor and have fallen in disgrace and shame. But, despite all that, they are granted the highest honor: the kingdom of heaven.” ([Working Preacher](#).) The expression “poor in spirit” included those who for whatever reason had lost their social standing in the community. The persecuted, those expelled from their homes because of leprosy, those maligned because of some offense committed by a family member, and those with no reputation or standing in the community.

Jesus today says that these people are blessed. The unjustly persecuted, those who are maligned by the gossiping tongues in the community, those who are hungry (both physically and hangry for justice), those who mourn... are all blessed. To them belongs the kingdom of God, and they will be comforted, they will be vindicated in due time, they will be filled with God’s justice when they inherit this kingdom prepared for them.

Like these people, we too need to hear that God cares for us when we suffer injustice, when we are maligned, when we are assaulted by all the temptations to give up, to feel hopeless or faithless, when we are overwhelmed with anxiety and fear, when we are mistreated by those we love, when we feel alone and abandoned in the world, when all we see is misfortune and heartache. We need to hear that God is on the side of those who suffer and that his kingdom is filled with people like us. People who are deeply loved by God, not because of how much they have in the bank, but because we are his beloved children and his Son chose to die for us. We belong to him, and not even one of his sheep will ever be lost.

We also come to church to practice the moral skills that make us blessed. The beatitudes list three of them. Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. These are conditions a person develops through practice. We become merciful by acting with mercy and compassion towards ourselves and others. Church is the field ground where we learn to practice this skill. But this skill needs to be practiced in the real world of our lives, where we spend most of our time. Merciful with those in our home, with those at the grocery store, those in hospitals and clinics, those in the streets and parks, those in our communities.

Church is the space we learn to become pure in heart. We come week after week to repent for the many evil thoughts that cross our minds every day. To align the internal inclinations of our hearts to the will of God. To ask God for strength and commitment to have generous assumptions about the people we meet in our lives. To purify our thinking and our feelings towards others and ourselves. To show mercy and compassion in everything we do. Church reminds us of our status as Children of God and inspires us to compassion.

In church we are invited weekly to be peacemakers, to act with civility and understanding. To be curious rather than judgmental. To have the type of love that supersedes our ideology and political affiliation. Church teaches us that love is more important than being right, that eco-chambers divide us while the Gospel unites us, that we are better when we are together, and the love doesn't require a straitjacket or a uniform. We don't all have to dress alike and look alike to be children of God and worthy of love and compassion. Church reminds us that the Peacemakers are children of God.

I can think of no better passage for us at our Annual Meeting than this passage from Matthew. We are so alone during the week that we need to be reminded that we belong to a reality that is much bigger than ourselves. We suffer from so much doubt and fear during the week that it is necessary for us to come to church to hear that there is truth in the world and that this truth is Jesus of Nazareth, an empathic Messiah who loves us and cares for us. We are exposed to so much misinformation and exaggeration that we need to come to church to get a break from polarization and division, and to be reminded that God creates us in community and that we "are more alike than we are unlike" (Maya Angelou). We need Church because we are not yet the people God created us to be and a Church is a hospital for sinners and not a country club for the righteous.

We come to Church to dream about new possibilities for ourselves and those we love. We come to pray for lives deeply rooted in love and compassion. Church is the only place many of us have where we are reminded that we have intrinsic value that cannot be captured in any resume. Here we all belong and are loved regardless of what we do for a living and regardless of where we have come from. We need this church and we need the God we have come here to see. We need church to be reminded that we are the blessed and that a deficit mindset is a lie of the enemy. We are truly the most fortunate people in the world because we have a God who loves us and because we have each other to rely on. We come to church to be reminded of this.

May our Lord continue to bless us. Amen!