



Sermon on the Mount  
 February 22, 2026  
 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent  
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead  
 Lamentations 3:19-26; Matthew 5:3-6

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, and the first installment of a sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew, chapters 5–7. I want to begin with a bit of backstory of why this text has been tugging at me. In recent years, there’s been a growing push among some religious groups to “return to our Christian roots” by doing important things—like “posting the Ten Commandments” in public schools. (Yes, that was sarcasm.) Beyond my conviction that church and state should remain separate, there’s another aspect of this behavior that troubles me. If these groups genuinely sought to return to the heart of Christianity, wouldn’t they be championing the Beatitudes, or how about the Greatest Commandment: love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself? That would fit nicely on a bumper sticker—and actually sound like Jesus. This is not to dismiss Moses or the Ten Commandments. They were foundational for a people being formed into a covenant community. But those who dedicate their lives to Jesus, are invited—no, expected—to move beyond the primer of the Ten Commandments to the blueprint for discipleship: The Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes—actual teachings of Jesus.

For more than twenty-one years, I've preached what the lectionary handed me or various sermon series the Holy Spirit has laid on my heart. But I have never taken a deep dive into this central text—until now. And even though I am just getting started, I sense that if God gives me another decade in the pulpit, I could stay within the parameters of these three chapters of Matthew and still have more to say. As we begin this journey together, I want to credit two authors and scholars whom I will be referencing throughout this sermon series. They are my trusted companions in this deep dive into Scripture: Richard Rohr who wrote *Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount* and Amy-Jill Levine who wrote *Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner's Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven*.

Most scholars agree that the Sermon on the Mount is as close as we can get to the heart of Jesus' teaching—so, it deserves our attention. In his book, Rohr writes of the new world order Jesus is ushering in—subverting the ways the “powers that be” operate. And since much of Jesus' teaching is concerned with turning conventional understandings of religion upside down, it's no wonder the scribes and Pharisees feel threatened by him. Nevertheless, Jesus has come to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven, the new world order that is no less than God's dream for the world.

Amy-Jill Levine, professor of New Testament and Jewish studies has this to say about Jesus' motivation:

I think what Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount is beginning the creation of a new movement with disciples, but not a movement in the way we think of political parties. I think what he is doing is setting up a new family or a new community. How do you live in this group? What would it look like to live in this new family where people actually did what the Sermon on the Mount thinks people should do and what the Sermon on the Mount thinks people should be?<sup>1</sup>

On Ash Wednesday, we were reminded that we came from dust and to dust we shall return. In a similar place of humility and vulnerability, Jesus begins his sermon by speaking words of blessing—not words of judgment, not a list of rules, not a demand for us to get our act together first. No. He starts by telling us who we already are—blessed!

To understand how the people hear Jesus' words of blessing, we need to understand the social order of his world. Drawing on the writings of sociologist Gerhard Lenski, Richard Rohr reminds us that most people in Jesus' time lived in agrarian societies divided into rigid social classes. At the top were rulers—kings and queens—who controlled an *enormous* share of the wealth. Beneath them were the governing elites: nobles and bureaucrats. Then came lower-level officials like soldiers, scribes, and teachers. Next were merchants and landowning priests. Below them were peasants—artisans, skilled workers, and those labeled *unclean* because of their origins or occupations. At the very bottom were the expendables—the destitute, beggars, people who

survived only by their wits or by the charity of others. Rohr makes a compelling connection between Jesus' world and ours, writing:

[I]t's that final class which is growing so quickly, the expendable people who are unemployed and unemployable. There's no way we need you, we say, in effect. We will undereducate you, undertrain you, undervalue you. We even hope you kill one another. We hope the drugs and guns will allow you to kill one another because we can't fit you into our definition of success... Yet it was the bottom of society that Jesus most consistently showed concern for. They seem to be the measure of how well we understand [and I would add, live into] the new world order.<sup>ii</sup>

The truth is about 98 percent of the people who have ever lived on this planet have been poor and uneducated, yet we have very little of their story. As the saying goes, history is written by the winners. We learn about the pyramids from Pharaoh's point of view—not from the thousands who gave their lives to build them. Most of history has been told from the top down. But the Bible is one of the exceptions. In fact, we might think of the Bible, at its heart, as resistance literature since most of it is written by or about people who were occupied, enslaved, poor, or pushed to the margins. In other words, the Bible tells its story from the bottom up.<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus begins his sermon from the bottom up and make no mistake—the people pay attention—for into their lived reality, he speaks a radical word: God is available to you—all of you. You do not have to jump through hoops to earn God's love. It is a gift—freely given. His message of radical love and inclusion was a threat to the powerful. After all, a world that is built on scarcity, privilege, and control cannot easily tolerate a God who gives love and belonging away freely—unconditionally.

So, let's take a moment to consider the first four Beatitudes found in Jesus' sermon.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Who are the poor in spirit? They are not those who think poorly of themselves, but those who live with a holy humility—people who know they didn't make it on their own. The poor in spirit recognize that they are recipients of grace, of community, of generosity. And they understand that grace is never meant to be hoarded; it is meant to be passed on, shared, paid forward in love.<sup>iv</sup>

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Those who mourn are blessed, in part, because not everyone can mourn. A heart that can grieve is a heart that has loved deeply. Mourning is not a failure of faith; it is evidence of the ache that love leaves behind, the holy bruise of having been open to another. And Jesus names that aching love as a place where God draws especially near—with comfort and quiet companionship in the shadows.<sup>v</sup>

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Meek does not mean weak, passive, or insignificant. A meek person is someone who holds real authority yet refuses to lord it over others—choosing service over domination, humility over control. And to inherit the land is not a prize or a windfall. It’s a responsibility to tend what we have been given—to steward the earth, our communities, our stories, and our legacies with reverence and care.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” In Greek, the word we translate as *righteousness* is closer to *justice*—a longing not just for personal virtue, but for a world made whole. To live a just life is to let our hearts be shaped by the longings of the poor, the meek, and those who weep. It is to refuse the comfort of a status quo that wounds others. If our truest hunger is for the things of God—mercy, compassion, peace, love—then why do we so often train our appetites on what can never satisfy: power, wealth, recognition? At its core, greed is a hunger with no end; it consumes and is never full. Yet, coveting more—more stuff, more status, more control—has become the liturgy of our society. And we can see, in our weary world and in our fractured communities, where that liturgy has led us.<sup>vi</sup>

The Beatitudes and the teachings that follow in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount are not a spiritual checklist or a set of impossible ideals. They are an invitation into a new world order that is no less than God’s dream for the world. Next Sunday, we will dive deeper into the Beatitudes, to learn more about how blessed we are, when we are learning to live the way of Jesus. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Amy Jill-Levine, *Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner’s Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven*, 10-11.

<sup>ii</sup> Richard Rohr, *Jesus’ Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount*, 61.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>iv</sup> Levine, 8.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>vi</sup> Rohr, 134-135.