



## Standing on **"BLESSED ARE THE CHEESEMAKERS"** New Ground

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12 || February 1, 2026 || St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA 02339 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

We are blessed with the beatitudes as our Gospel story this morning. These are the first verses of the Sermon on the Mount, which Jesus delivers very early in his ministry.

In the first few weeks of Epiphany, we've heard Jesus invite people to follow him and to experience the world from his perspective. This morning he takes his followers up a mountain – reminiscent of his forebearer Moses – and he proclaims the beatitudes – a snapshot of the life God honors and the kingdom values that God blesses and favors.

The beatitudes may be so familiar that it is easy to miss how radical they are. We hear them read often at funerals or quiet services as comfort and reassurance. When Jesus first spoke these words, they did not land gently. They created a seismic shift.

I cannot study the beatitudes without remembering that famous scene from Monty Python's movie *Life of Brian* where a large crowd has gathered and is trying to hear Jesus preaching from a distance. When asked - "What is he saying?!?" someone confidently repeats, "Blessed are the cheesemakers." A ridiculous argument follows about whether this blessing applies only to literal cheesemakers or to anyone involved in the production of dairy products more broadly.

It's a great scene with more hilarious misunderstandings and interpretations amplifying the point that these teachings are so surprising and unsettling that they must be wrong.

Matthew's Gospel is written for a community living under Roman occupation where power was enforced by violence, loyalty was demanded and financial security was tenuous and fleeting for most. Religious leaders were prosecuted if they offended the occupiers and could be jailed and killed. Faith communities were being coopted into excusing or pacifying the brutish Roman ways, rather than risking their wrath by challenging them.

The Beatitudes are a direct challenge and a subversion of Ceasar's power. Jesus is proclaiming God's values, and is directing his followers to understand the rules and expectations of God's kingdom. The Beatitudes explain who God stands with -- which is why they were revolutionary and unsettling in their original context, and why this foundational text feels so important and painfully relevant today.

We too are living in a time of disruption when so many of us feel unmoored, or worse – paralyzed, grieving and exhausted. Institutions we once trusted feel fragile or broken. Violence—physical, rhetorical, systemic—has become commonplace. We are witnessing state sponsored violence that is lawless and feels unchecked. Public discourse is entrenchedly polarized. Many of us are walking around with a sense of heartbreak that is difficult to articulate and absolutely impossible to ignore.

Let the Beatitudes be our guide in this moment because Jesus is speaking them to us. The Beatitudes mean that we do not measure success by dominance or winning. It means we resist narratives that dehumanize others for political, economic, or cultural gain. It means we refuse to truck in cruelty as strength or indifference as wisdom.

Jesus declares that those who mourn are blessed - not the breast-beating, bewailing and bemoaning mourners we find elsewhere in scripture, but the people who feel the pain of the world; who see that something is wrong in the world and know that part of our life's work is to do something about it.

Blessed are those who refuse to numb themselves to this challenging moment.

Blessed are the merciful. How can we seek to be merciful? How can we be the people who extend generosity and kindness when it is neither earned nor deserved? How can we be the blessed people who meet ugliness with kindness? That is how God's people show mercy.

Living like this is not easy – as Jesus tells us in the final blessing, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Jesus says with certainty that there will be a cost to living as Kingdom people. Embracing the Beatitudes and being peacemakers, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, are meek and merciful was counter cultural in Christ's time, and is the only way to change the trajectory of our present circumstances.

Living as expressions of the Beatitudes puts us at odds with systems that thrive on fear, exclusion, and the accumulation of power. This morning, Jesus preaches that this discomfiting faithfulness is what is required of each of us.

Each of us has our own gifts as Kingdom people to invest in this moment. For some of us it will look like marching in the streets. For others, it will look like additional prayer time and self-reflection to better understand which voices we amplify and which voices we dismiss.

Living a life as described in the Beatitudes is not easy or simple and, as Jesus says, it is costly. Figuring out your next right step on this path may seem daunting, but you've already taken a good one this morning. By being here, in person or online, you offer yourselves in vulnerability and humility to God, to be made aware of God's love for you and the expectations delivered so powerfully and clearly in the Beatitudes.

We are adding a community gathering to our weekly schedule, starting this week. Perhaps the Coffee and Current Events conversations will nourish you in your Kingdom values?

I also commend to you a letter published by more than 150 Episcopal Bishops in response to the tragic deaths in Minneapolis of Alex Pretti and Renee Good. It is a powerful statement by our denomination, by way of our Episcopal leaders, and reminds us that there is no one right way to respond. This is a moment that calls for action, fueled by our values and our conscience and the teachings of Jesus. I was moved by the video's mantra that *every act of courage matters*.

I don't know what action will look like for you. I will continue to participate in public demonstrations of love and non-violent protest. I will offer pastoral care and presence for anyone struggling and will do my level best, everyday to embody the Beatitudes.

What does this moment mean or require of you? While every person's response will be different, just as everyone's gifts are varied – I know one thing for certain. We can not be kingdom people alone. We can't do the work Jesus gives us by ourselves. We need each other. We need this community, and we need to be reminded and reinvigorated by our Holy "Why". Why we would go out on a limb and be discomfited. Why we would put up with peoples' ugliness in the face of our mercy and love. That is the gift of church and this community. Every Sunday we return to be loved and nourished and fortified for this difficult time and our challenging call to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

Amen+