

Kirk of St James, Sunday February 1, 2026

Sermon “Blessings and Promises” Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Please suspend judgement on what I am about to say--whenever I read the Beatitudes one of the first things that comes to mind is Monty Python. I was working in Ukraine with another volunteer on a free weekend, when we found an English copy of *The Life of Brian* movie at the market, and it was so exciting to have an English movie to watch, we bought it. In one of the scenes in the movie the crowd is gathered around Jesus listening to the beatitudes, and there is a group at the back of the crowd who are too far away to hear properly, and one of them goes “did he say blessed are the cheese makers?” So, I know it is irreverent but now whenever I think of the Beatitudes one of my first thoughts are always about cheese. Today in Church we are not talking about cheese in any form, instead we are looking at one of the most familiar sections of the gospels.

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five major sections of Jesus’ teaching provided by Matthew (the others are found in Matthew 10, 13, 18, and 24-25). The passage itself is full of poetic beauty, but at the same time, at first glance, the beatitudes may seem impractical for the world we live in. As one writer said “We admire the instruction, but we fear the implications of putting the words into actual practice. We live in a time when the blessings being given are to those who succeed at the expense of others. To be poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful, and meek will get you nowhere in a culture grounded in competition and fear. Perhaps this is why most references to the Beatitudes imply that in giving instruction, Jesus was literally turning the values of the world upside down. Who can survive in this world if they are attempting to live into the spirit of the Beatitudes?” While preparing for today and thinking about some of the major upheavals facing the global community it certainly can start to feel like “might makes right” and the more power you can grab the better, however, unsurprisingly Jesus has a few things to say about this.

Now as you may know I like to follow social media trends because I believe they are an interesting window into the undercurrents of society. While some like the current 6-7 trend you may hear young people referring to—it has swept through both Grayson’s elementary school, and Theo’s daycare, are not all that helpful others do point to trends and shifts in thinking. For example, for a long-time minimalism was a popular esthetic, in home décor, clothing etc. which then gave way to a current shift towards maximalism. There was a lot of talk about influencers, then in reaction anti

influencers which oddly enough were influencers trying to gain followers from other influencers—it gets convoluted. But one trend I really enjoy is a push back against the consumerist notion that in order to be important or, wealthy means having a lot of stuff, and in some cases “particular” stuff. I referenced this back before Christmas. Now instead of homes with massive entry ways, and countertops filled with products you see things like “this what rich looks like to me,” and it is a sunset someone got to experience, or their children reading together, moments that don’t require stuff—just someone taking a moment to appreciate the little moments of beauty each day. While these are perhaps small counter cultural messages meant to make people think, today in Matthew Jesus is delivering the biggest counter cultural message of all.

One thing a number of the commentaries stressed was the importance of these Beatitudes being in the indicative tense and not in the imperative. Essentially what means is Jesus was not telling us to go out and become these things, these words a being spoken to people who already are mourning, who are persecuted, who were poor. “Here we get to hear what Jesus’ proclaiming the good news of the kingdom really amounts to.” They may have been poor in spirit, they may have been mourning, there may have been those among the crowd who hungered and thirsted for righteousness. And that day Jesus spoke a blessing on them, a blessing on those no one else would have ever considered blessed.

I have dearly loved travelling throughout the years, but in doing so I have also saw some things that have haunted my nights. People starving, people without medication, people straining under injustice but never seeming to gain ground, people who were persecuted for what they believed in. Sometimes in the middle of those situations, you wonder where is God? Where are these blessings because this does not look right. Like the famous painting of the torment of St Anthony on the Isenheim Altarpiece, and St Anthony is being afflicted by demons. In the corner of the painting there is a little note that reads "where were you God, why were you not there to heal my wounds?" But unknown to Anthony who is at this point surrounded by demons, God is there in the background and angels are coming to help him.

That day on the mountain Jesus spoke good news, made possible through the life of Christ. That day those who were blessed were not the rich, were not the elite, and they were not those who had power. Instead, that day the Beatitudes were spoken to those groups God deems worthy, not by

virtue of their own achievements or status, but because God chooses to be on the side of the weak, the forgotten, the despised, the justice seekers, the peace makers, and those persecuted because of their faith. God has pronounced his blessing on those no one else would even think of. There are many moments in this world, where we may have called out "where are you God? I am mourning but not comforted. I seek justice, but it alludes me. I want peace, but all the world around me is at war." The blessings for us in these moments have been spoken, made possible through the life of Christ who would also cry out "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" There may be days of darkness, but in the end, there will be light, because the tomb is empty. The Beatitudes have been proclaimed, and through Jesus and the work of his disciples, and believers throughout the ages they are being fulfilled.

While proclaiming the blessings something else happened that day, Jesus also framed the call to discipleship, who we are to be as disciples of Christ. The Beatitudes invite us into a way of being in the world that leads to particular practices. I am not sure about you, but often when I look at a passage like the Beatitudes it simply seems impossible, and in some ways complicated. There are so many people in the world that give up so much to live these things, and I always feel like I am standing on the edge, but not quite ready to commit yet. Mother Theresa spent her life helping people, caring for them. Martin Luther King Jr. showed the world what human love and forgiveness really looked like. Bonhoeffer gave his life, so that others may live. They are so impossibly out of reach, how could one ever be like them. In fact, why even try? We have made things too complicated for ourselves. We have set out the impossibilities before us. "I cannot be meek at work; I need to be strong." "I live in a country where we do not suffer open war, there is no opportunity to be a peacemaker." "I cannot offer mercy, because no one will offer it to me." We all face it and live it every day. But what if we stripped away all of the complexity, and all of the expectations and just hear the words that Jesus is saying "You are blessed in this life whenever you demonstrate humility, bring a peaceful presence, open your heart to others, and show mercy on those who cry for it." When we hear it like this, it is not so intimidating, in fact it seems like something we might try to do in our daily life, we can have courage and do not need to fear.

The Beatitudes invite us to be hopeful, because we place our faith in Christ who offered hope to the hopeless. When we are hopeful, we stand in the world sure of the possibility that the day will

come when mercy, humility, peace and love are the descriptions of what it means to live in the world. I believe it is fitting, that we celebrate Presbyterian World Service and Development on the same day we look at the Beatitudes because this program is one way we can help live into the Sermon on the Mount. It is a tangible way we as a community of faith put our faith into action. The mandate of PWS&D in many ways reflects the values of the Beatitudes. As the mission statement for the organization states (in part) “We undertake service among churches and organizations seeking to transform their communities by promoting justice, peace and the integrity of creation. We are committed to development, involving men and women in activities that restore human dignity, ease the pain of want, promote self-help and encourage community cooperation that benefits all members. Development activities will always be sensitive to gender issues, empowerment of the marginalized and the protection of human rights.”

PWS&D values humility, love, peace and mercy. It also helps us to live into the Beatitudes as well, for not only can we support projects, but it also develops a sense of empathy in us. When I say empathy, I do not mean pity, for that simply means to feel sorry for someone. I also do not mean sympathy, where we may understand what someone is going through and try to offer comfort or advice. I mean empathy, which Henri Nouwen described as “growing with the inner recognition that your neighbour shares your humanity with you. This partnership cuts through all walls which might have kept you separate. Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust, subject to the same laws, destined for the same end.”

The Beatitudes are an important part of the teaching of Jesus. They are a blessing on those society would not see as blessed. Even though those blessings are not always obvious, nor do they always seem complete, we know they have been proclaimed and through Jesus Christ they will one day be fulfilled. Until that time, we strive to be a people of the Beatitudes, and to show empathy. Not pity, or sympathy, but an empathy that knows no bounds. The daily challenge for us is to “demonstrate humility, bring a peaceful presence, open our hearts to others, and show mercy on those who cry for it.” And when we have days when we are unable to do so, or when we fail at it, as we will all have those days, we do not feel discouraged but rather look with hope toward Jesus. Tomorrow is a new day, filled with possibility.