

Sunday Sermon February 1, 2026

Thirty years ago, I worked in a residential treatment facility for teenagers. They were kids whose struggles included childhood trauma, mental health issues, chemical dependency, eating disorders and self-harm. Some had been incarcerated. All were prone to acting out and hurting themselves and others, and so they came to this safe, supportive living environment to learn better ways of dealing with their challenges and emotions, and better, healthier ways of living.

One of my fellow staff members was a woman named Margareth. Margareth had been there for more than 20 years, and she worked the overnight shift on Unit 2. She was kind, but firm and no nonsense. The rules were to be followed to the letter. Margareth was also an artist. A painter.

Now overnight shifts were typically very quiet. The kids were all in their rooms, hopefully sleeping. Margareth sat at the desk in the hallway outside the office, keeping a watchful eye on each room, but she also painted throughout the night.

She painted on rectangle-shaped panels. The scene was a beautiful garden with lovely flowers and trees and creeping vines, ponds and waterfalls. Mingled into that beauty, she painted the kids. But she painted them not as they were, but as they could be.

She learned that Ashley wanted to be a teacher. So she painted a smiling Ashley standing in front of a chalkboard (remember those?) holding a piece of chalk. Seneca was always talking about basketball, so she painted him holding a ball and wearing a jersey. Jessica loved music, so she had a guitar and little notes coming out of her mouth. Tyler loved cars, so he was bending over an engine, tinkering.

The kids all knew they were being painted into the garden, but Margareth never let them see until she was finished. Then there was a big reveal as the panel was added to the long mural in the hallway outside their bedrooms.

They became part of all the kids who had come before them, all the kids who had hopes and dreams of a better life. When I worked there, the hallway mural was more than 20 feet long, filled with the faces of all those children of God, together in a beautiful garden.

I remember the night she first showed it to me when I was brand new. She talked about those kids going back 2 decades. In the midst of their struggles and perhaps the worst period of their life, she painted them in a better version of themselves, so that they might see and know that they were more than their present struggles, more than the worst thing they had ever done, that they were gifted, talented, and precious in God's sight.

Many had grown up constantly being told they were bad and would never amount to anything. So they lived into that. She painted a better vision, a kingdom vision. I would suggest that she painted them as God saw them, rather than how the world saw them.

Something similar is happening in today's Gospel, I believe. We hear the Beatitudes, where Jesus proclaims the members of that great crowd "blessed." This is the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Just like Moses, Jesus ascends the mountain to teach the crowd, but instead of a list of "thou shalt nots," Jesus says "you are blessed." I imagine that mountainside filled with all kinds of people, all "sorts and conditions of humanity" as we say.

These powerful blessings affirm and lift up the poor in spirit, the struggling, and persecuted. He blesses those who are striving to live out kingdom virtues, virtues like meekness, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, mercy, peacemaking and purity of heart. These ways of living – with humility, righteousness, mercy and peace – are often scorned and viewed as weakness in the eyes of the world, but in God's sight they are affirmed and blessed. For they are Kingdom virtues.

"You will be filled. You are children of God. You will see God. Yours is the kingdom of heaven."

God's ways of justice, righteousness, mercy and peace are lifted up. You are "blessed" Jesus says. You will pay a price, for these are not the ways of the world, but your reward will be great as God's Kingdom grows and spreads.

Jesus paints a beautiful mural for us today. It is a vision of the kingdom of God, where the hurting are lifted up and the best of our humanity shines forth, so that we might be the people that God has created us to be, living together as God intends. For God sees us not just as we are, but as we could be.

My friend Margareth sought to inspire the kids in a similar way. She depicted those struggling children not as they were, but in the light of who they could be, showing them that they were gifted and "blessed" and that they had infinite value in our eyes and in the eyes of God.

I'm grateful for her, for that mural will always be snapshot of the kingdom for me.

Let us pray-

Gracious and Loving God, help us to see ourselves and each other as you see us: as "blessed" and precious in your sight. When the world around us labels, puts down and casts aside, give us courage to stand up, defend and lift up.

Knit us together in your love, so that your Kingdom might come on earth as it is in heaven.

In Jesus name we pray...