

Reflection for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany-February 1, 2026 by Jennifer Irving

It's not very often that the same Sunday contains two scripture readings that are so well-known and well-liked as this reading from Micah about what God requires of us and this reading from Matthew known as the Beatitudes where Jesus offers blessings to the people. How is a minister supposed to choose which passage to reflect upon?

Just for interest sake, who here would call the passage from Micah one of their favourites? Where according to the hymn we just sang before the kids went off to Sunday school the answer to the question "What does the Lord Require of you?" is "to seek justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God". Anybody love this scripture as I do? (*I saw four or five hands go up*) Just as an aside, this was also a favourite of the late Gord Kerr, our tech guru when we were setting up wifi throughout the church so that might give you a clue to the church's password. I don't know if the extra "h" in there is to throw off people who might try to get into our system without permission or to keep people off their phones during the sermon!

How about the gospel lesson from Matthew this morning where Jesus gives starts his famous "Sermon on the Mount" with this list of blessings:

- ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- ⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- ⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- ⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- ⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
- ⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- ⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

I don't know if there are more poetic words attributed to Jesus than these written by Matthew. And at the risk of getting into the weeds of biblical criticism it is passages like this one that led scholars to believe that Matthew and Luke both has a source lost to history simply known now as "Q" along with the Gospel of Mark in front of them when each of them wrote their accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. Because there are parables and teachings they both recount that are not in Mark including these words we know now as "The Beatitudes". Show of hands for those who love these words? (*There were over a dozen hands that went up for this one!*)

Truth be told, I have a complicated relationship with "The Beatitudes". The first time I ever preached on this passage from Matthew was while I was a student at Emmanuel College. I was taking a preaching class with the Professor of Preaching and Worship at Knox College (the Presbyterian equivalent of Emmanuel College—I also took classes at the Anglican colleges of Wycliffe and Trinity, and the Catholic colleges, Regis and St. Michael's—and used all their libraries too—these schools together make up the Toronto School of Theology and I am so thankful to have been able to access such an ecumenical smorgasbord while taking my Master of Divinity). Needless to say, I had spent hours and hours and hours (far longer than I ever spend on my weekly sermons here—for better or for worse—even when I have to rewrite them at 12:30am in the morning because my computer somehow managed to delete my original sermon between the time I saved it and the time I went to print it—don't ask) That being said, I stood up to preach what I hoped was the masterpiece of 1998 in front of all of my peers and the esteemed Dr. Stephen Farris. And I don't remember the feedback the Rev. Dr. Farris gave me exactly but it was something like "Your sermon was fine, unfortunately you missed the point of your scripture reading entirely."

I remember being pretty defensive about the whole thing over a drink with friends at the student pub but the truth is I don't even think I really believed my own sermon! I've always had trouble understanding these "Blessings" as any sort of "Blessing".

I had a room-mate at Emmanuel College who was from Newfoundland and Labrador and every once in a while she would come out with a "God Bless her" or a "God love ya" and it was usually in response to someone doing something less than desirable. It wasn't exactly a good thing. And frankly, that's kind of how I've always heard these "blessings" from Jesus. Is it really good news to be told you are blessed when in the throes of grief or being reviled and persecuted? I struggle to find the gospel here.

That is until this week when at our weekly Bible Study I read these words from a small book that Shirley Somerville brought one of our first gatherings in the fall called "The Cotton Patch Version of Matthew and John". I have to be honest, I didn't have high hopes for a meaningful translation of the bible in this little book since it was touted to be "a modern translation with a Southern accent, fervent, earthy, rich in humor." I guess I just assumed it was going to be some evangelical right wing Christian version that wouldn't have a thing to say to us United Church folk. I then I read Matthew 5:1-12 just as I read it to you a few moments ago. And instead of the usual 'Blessed are the poor in spirit,... those who mourn,... the meek,... those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...' each of the beatitudes in this version repeats "are God's people". The poor in spirit? God's people. Those who mourn? God's people. The meek? God's people. The peacemakers? God's people. Those who are reviled, called names, harassed? God's people. I believe each and every person surrounding Jesus on that mountainside must have heard themselves included in God's people by the end of that Sermon on the Mount. That's what I call good news!

You can see from our readings from Micah and the Psalm and even from Corinthians that we struggle to figure out how exactly we get to be God's people. To get to be on the "Holy Mountain". Like, should I sacrifice thousands of sheep-maybe my first born? Is that how I earn God's love? Is that how I get to be a part of God's people? The Psalmist seems very off base. Who lives on God's holy mountain? Just the best. The brightest and the best. Paul has to remind those poor people of Corinth (I'm paraphrasing here): "Look, you're not the brightest and the best—but you're God's people."

Only after reading this did I take a closer look at who wrote this Cotton Patch Version of Matthew and John. According to the back of the book, the author, Clarence Jordan "was famed for having founded "Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, a pioneering interracial farming community in the heart of the deep South...its witness against racial prejudice made it the object of mounting hostility. Sustained by friends throughout the world, Clarence and his dedicated followers braved violence, economic boycotts, and legal reprisals."

That should teach me not to judge a book by it's cover.

Turns out that the Cotton Patch Version is exactly the kind of version we at the United Church need to be reading. A reminder to us as we work towards ensuring all are recognized as "God's people"—simply by being—without having to prove anything! So we continue to build this house where all are welcome. As we work to become an anti-racist denomination and as we work here to become an affirming ministry. As we live into our call to deep spirituality, bold discipleship and daring justice. As we seek justice, show mercy, and walk humbly with our God. As we build a house for all God's people to safely live. We live into the vision Jesus first preached so long ago. We humbly live the gospel just as the Lord requires us to do. Thanks be to God.

