

Sermon February 1, 2026

A Prayer for Active Peace

O Holy One,

We hear the ancient call echoing through the centuries:

What does the Lord require of you?

It is not a call for empty words or grand gestures, but a roadmap for how we treat one another in the messiness of our world.

You call us to Do Justice

We pray for the courage to do justice. May we not just pray for peace, but dismantle the systems that prevent it. Give us the strength to stand with the marginalized, to speak truth to power, and to ensure that every person has enough to flourish.

You call us to Love Kindness

We pray for the heart to love kindness. In a world often sharpened by division, soften our edges. May we practice steadfast, radical, and unconditional compassion. Help us to see the "other" not as a threat, but as a reflection of the Divine spark that you gifted to us... worthy of dignity and belonging.

You call us to Walk Humbly

We pray for the wisdom to walk humbly.

Teach us to listen more than we lecture, to admit when we are wrong, and to recognize that we are all travelers on this same fragile earth. Let us set aside our egos and our false sense of certainty. Quiet our spirits, O God

May we walk in step with You, and in step with one another. Let our "amen" be found in our actions.

Amen.

- **The Wide Hug (All-Around):** Spread arms wide to each side, saying, "Thank you, God, for being all around us!" Then, wrap arms around yourself for a tight hug, saying, "Thank you, God, for always loving us!".

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Me and We

Matthew 5:1-12

As Jesus begins his ministry, the ones who will benefit, who will hear the message, who will follow—they will be the ones who seem unworthy by others. They are the marginalized and oppressed. They are the ones who will be called children of God.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"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.

Blessings and Honor

Years ago, my father and stepmother moved to Birmingham, AL. Annie, who had lived in the Chicago area all of her life, had a little bit of trouble getting used to the southern way of life. One day she went to a party, where a woman cornered her and tried to give her advice about where to get her hair and makeup done. "I really don't think I need that," Annie said. "Well, bless your heart honey, you're not in the north anymore."

"Bless your heart!" It's an expression that just drips with meaning. It can be meant from the bottom of the heart... a response to bad news or to celebrate good news. But, mostly it is used to politely put you in your place. "Why bless your heart" can be said to someone who is just not catching on to something that's obvious to everyone else. Instead of rolling your eyes or saying something snarky, a simple bless your heart does the trick.

Today, we hear how Jesus climbed up to a mountain top to preach words of Blessings and Hope. This is not a "bless your heart" moment, which puts people in their place, Jesus empowers those who have been persecuted, mourn or pushed aside. Jesus sees desperate people living under the oppressive fist of an Empire where some people are disposable. Jesus lifts them up and empowers them... sees them and

hears their cries. And, Jesus prepares them for the hard work that lies ahead.

I see you, he says, and you are blessed!

A biblical scholar named Jerome Neyrey translates this scripture a little differently. He says that the original Greek word that we read as "blessed" is really closer to "honored." You are honored if you are poor in spirit... you are honored when you are persecuted and hated. You are honored if you show mercy, seek peace and thirst for justice.

Honor was incredibly important in the New Testament world, but it wasn't something you earned. Your place in society is directly connected to your family and social standing. If you were part of an important family, you were important, and you were honored. If you weren't, you were nobody. But even the most important person could be pushed aside if their behavior did not reflect well on their family and community. The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with laws that if broken could be enough to push you out... no matter who you are.

And why would the families of Jesus' followers push them out? Their behavior would have been seen as scandalous. Men and women gathered together, even worshipping together... shocking. Sinners welcomed into Jesus' community... even more shocking. The treatment of their own families... the most shocking of all. Jesus told one man to abandon his aging parents to follow him, instead of staying by them to care for them until they died, and to make sure they received an honorable burial. It's not surprising that Jesus' followers were pushed out of family and community.

Once someone is pushed out, it snowballed into all kinds of other hardships. The one pushed out lost their place in society - they faced poverty and homelessness: The hunger and thirst that he talks about -

- literal hunger and thirst incurred for righteousness as Jesus redefined it -- would certainly follow, as would mourning.

And, the words spoken by Jesus today are words sent directly to those who left family and community behind. Jesus gathers in all the people who are completely isolated and without honor in the society's eyes. He gathers them in and creates a community where they have a special place of honor.

Jesus ascribes honor to each of them, declaring that these... the poor and destitute... are the people that God honors. Their human fathers may disown them, their community might turn away. But they are children of the God of all creation. God claims them, blesses them and gives them honor.

And God makes them family.

Jesus tells us that all who follow him are children of the One who is Father and Mother to us all. We are all sisters and brothers. As members of one family, we are kin to Jesus. Others might push us aside or reject us, but here... in this place... we are all family. And family means that no one is left behind.

And what does God require of us, God's own sons and daughters? To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

Sounds simple, doesn't it. But living like that has a cost, just as the earliest followers discovered. We hopefully won't end up destitute like some of the earliest followers were, but standing up for what is right has a cost in our society too. We stand to lose a lot as people look at us and wonder what we are thinking. Extending an extravagant welcome to those that others look down on takes courage. We need only look to the streets of Minneapolis to see cost of following Jesus and those he honors.

Beloved, We are called to live out God's love with every word and action... and create a world where no one is left behind. Today, I think of the pastor of the first church I ever joined who was thrown on the ground and pepper sprayed by an ice agent a few week ago. Blessed and honored are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

I think of, two close friends, joined the protest in Minneapolis last week., representing all the churches in our conference. Blessed and honored are the peacemakers.

I think of our own members who stand on the street corner across the street to support Nora, as she struggles for recognition in her own community. I think of them standing out there, insults hurled at them. Blessed and honored are those who people revile and persecute.

What does God call each of us to do today?

God values those moments when we stand up for justice and kindness. God honors it, just as God honors the poor and grief-stricken siblings that we serve.

What would our world look like if we honored those whom God honors? What would happen if we offered true blessings to the poor and grieving; the merciful and peacemakers. What would happen if we lived our lives hungering and thirsting for justice? What would it cost us if we lived more deeply into justice, and mercy, and humility? And, if we take the risk and move forward in honor, what blessings await us on that journey? Let us go out together and see what blessings and honor await us.

What does God require of you... to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Thanks be to God!

Sacrament of Communion

Invitation to the Table

Leader: Come, all who hunger for righteousness, all who long for mercy, all who seek peace in a restless world.

This table is not for the perfect, but set for the humble in spirit, for those who know their need of God.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Leader: Blessed are You, God of heaven and earth, who calls us to be salt and light, to love our enemies, and to build our lives upon the rock of Your truth.

We thank You for Jesus, who showed us the way of the Kingdom— a way of compassion, justice, and grace.

Words of Institution

Leader: On the night before was denied and betrayed, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and shared it with His friends, saying:

"This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way, He took the cup, gave thanks, and said:

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, remember me."

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for God— come, for you will be filled. The gifts of God for the people of God.

Sharing the Bread and Cup

The Charge

Leader: Lord, You have fed us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Send us now to live as peacemakers, to forgive as we have

been forgiven, and to shine with the light of Your love in all the world.
Hear now our common prayer...

Benediction Inspired by the Sermon on the Mount

Beloved, Your strength may fail but God's hand never will!

May you walk in the light of God's kingdom,
where the humble are lifted,
the merciful are embraced,
and the peacemakers are called children of God.

May your heart hunger for what is right,
your spirit be filled with compassion,
and your life shine as a beacon of hope in a weary world.

Go in peace, carrying the blessing of Christ—
to comfort the brokenhearted,
to love without measure,
and to live as a reflection of His grace.

Amen.

Bless the food