

*4 Epiphany – Year A*

*Lections: Micah 6:1-8; Ps. 15; 1 Cor. 1:18-31; Matt. 5:1-12*

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, Our Rock and Our Redeemer.*

Well, good morning, Grace Church. If you're feeling a mix of emotions as I break open the Word this morning, trust me, you are not alone. For me, the mixed bag includes, first, a lot of excitement to take on this new role as your bridge priest for the next few months. I have come to know you a bit as first a student, then a deanery colleague of, and then a pinch-hitter for Regina over the last few years. While I obviously don't know the fulness of who you are as a community, let alone as individuals, what I do know is that you are a people after God's own heart. As the prophet Micah puts it in today's reading, you are a people who do justice, who love kindness, and who walk humbly with our God. So, I'm excited to walk with you. But I also feel some sadness that Regina and her family are not here this morning. And to be quite honest, which I hope we will be with each other as priest and people, in the mix is some trepidation. Even in this limited and temporary role, I wonder if I have what it takes to be the bridge priest you need me to be at this time.

But what about you? Last week, you had a beautiful celebration for Regina's 8 ½ years with you and for all you have accomplished together. Maybe your mix of emotions still has some lingering joy and elation from that. But maybe now the sadness of loss has started to set in. 8 ½ years is a long time, after all, so maybe there's mourning. Maybe you also have some trepidation, some anxiety. After all, we, and I can use that word now, we still have some work to do on this tower. We're still welcoming Patrick and his ministry among us with our kids and teens. Heck, we might still be figuring out who we even are after COVID. And to top it off, we have an annual meeting to get through after this! What a mess of emotions. What a mess!

And yet, and yet, as one of my mentors likes to say, God is in the mess. God *is* in the mess of emotions that you might be feeling. And, my friends, it is our faith in God's steadfastness that always allows us to come through any kind of mess to the other side.

Now, some of you might be wondering, "What even is a 'bridge priest?'" The technical answer is that I am appointed by the Vestry upon the recommendation of our Bishop and his staff to serve temporarily between settled clergy. Bridge priests usually have a limited focus on Sunday worship and pastoral care, which is why I will only be serving with you half-time. Typically a bridge priest's appointment is on the order of weeks. However, given the massive state of transition in our diocese right now, I will most likely be serving with you until the end of June. During that time, your wardens and Vestry will discern the next steps and work with our diocese on finding a more full-time successor for Regina.

For better or worse, words like "usual" and "typical" don't apply that much to church these days. In the wake of COVID and all it has wrought, it's become almost cliché to say we are trying to find a new normal. But it's true. We all are. And so while I certainly can't promise that life at Grace will continue as it "usually" has, I can promise that I will be here by your side through the messiness of it. And far more importantly, I can promise you that God is right here with us.

After all, Jesus, our Incarnate God, promises us that himself. And he promises not just that he will be with us, but also that we are blessed, even in the midst of the mess.

Is your spirit perhaps impoverished by the loss of your longtime spiritual leader? You are blessed, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

Are you mourning? You are blessed, for you will be comforted.

Are you humbled and made meek by the challenges facing us as a parish? You are blessed, for you will inherit the earth.

But perhaps you are also ready to get to work, hungry and thirsty even for the righteous work there still is to do in Newton Corner and beyond. You are blessed, for you will be filled.

Perhaps you are pure of heart, or with a better translation, single-hearted and clear in your purpose, as an individual Christian and as a member of this parish. You are blessed, for you will see God.

Perhaps you are ready to be a peacemaker, within this Grace family and in a world so desperately in need of it. You are blessed, for you will be called a child of God.

And perhaps Regina's leaving honestly has had no impact on your life. This might even be your first Sunday here at Grace and there is enough going on at work, at school, with your friends or family, that you feel overwhelmed by it all, maybe even persecuted. You still are blessed, for yours is the kingdom of heaven as well.

These are the promises Jesus makes to us. Even if we find ourselves reviled, suffering, and persecuted because we choose to follow him and his way of love, we are still, very much blessed.

But *how* are we blessed, you might be wondering. And how do we know that we are? How do we realize any value that possessing the kingdom of heaven or being called a child of God might have?

Well, I hope to more fully answer those questions over the next few Sundays, but for now, suffice it to say that it matters that Jesus is addressing a crowd in this sermon on the mount. And so, it's important that he uses the plural forms of these words.

These are promises made not primarily to us as individuals, but as a church, as his own body. And we realize these promises by being the blessing *for each other*. When some of us are mourning, we all bless them by comforting them. When some of us hunger and thirst for righteousness, we all fill them by joining or supporting them in their work, and thus blessing them. And when some of us are peacemakers in this broken world, we see it and acknowledge that only a child of God could do such difficult work, and thus, we bless them. And so on and so on.

The specifics of how we do that in this time of transition will be revealed to us, I trust. But for today, let us sit with Jesus on that mountain, and let his words wash over us. You are blessed. You are blessed. You are blessed. Amen.