

Sunday February 1, 2026

Reflection: “Choosing to travel the path of simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion.” (The Rev. Catherine Somerville)

It is good to be here. You know what? I haven't preached a sermon for over a year since I retired. Let's see how this goes.....

I am remembering a quote from George Burns, that the secret to a good sermon is to have a strong beginning, a solid ending, and to have the two, the beginning and the ending as close together as possible. May that be so.

Would you pray with me: Dear God, may the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts together, the day-dreaming, the musing, the wondering, the questions, the moments when something clicks and makes a bit of sense for our living, may it all be acceptable in your sight and to your hearing. Amen.

When you spend your winters in Sudbury as we do, you understand both the ache of longing, and the joy of discovering a bit of hope. The other night, I put on my 27 layers of clothing and stepped out the door for my daily walk. I stopped in my tracks- I really did!- because it was 5:30 at night and it wasn't dark! The sky was filled with the brilliant colours of glorious sunset, and for almost 30 minutes of my trek, I was walking in daylight. We experience about 2 minutes more daylight each day, from the end of December. Today, we will enjoy 54 more minutes of daylight than we did a month ago.

Longing for spring. Carrying the hope of green grass and budding trees.

People of faith have always carried longing and hope close to their hearts. We are hearing about the shootings in Minnesota, and we listen to the terrible rhetoric to the south of us. We look at world news and see that Israel continues to bully their way in their quest for more land and Hamas retaliates with yet another bombing. Ukraine is chocking and Russia keeps pummeling. Here in Canada, we are beginning to wake up to the reality that the history we learned in school is not an accurate history. This land was not discovered by European explorers as the Doctrine of Discovery tries to tell us. It was taken from people whose roots and ties to the land go back thousands of years. And yet, we perpetuate this faulty Doctrine of Discovery teaching because we still see fit to deny First Nations access to water, adequate housing that is not subject to flooding, to decent schooling.

All of us acknowledge that things in this world are broken and we long for the new day to dawn.

So, we talk, and we pray, and we read up on the issues because we know that is what means to carry hope in your soul. And we come to church and listen to sacred, ancient scriptures because we believe that God intends for a better way, a world where people live together as neighbours and friends. We need the weekly reminders.

A Christian poet by the name of Ann Weems has acknowledged this double-edged truth for faithful people, how we are called to carry both longing and hope. “Who among us does not have dreams that our lives, our neighbours’ lives, the lives of people living in Gaza, and Jerusalem and Kyiv can be changed? Who among us does not yearn for a bit more time so that our hearts can ponder the word of God, and make more moments for kneeling, for noticing, for bursting into song, for allowing the peace of feeling calm to settle in for a change rather than always feeling responsible, living frazzled, making more space for the spirit’s journey?”

We have been given two readings this morning that speak about what it means for us to carry both the longing and the hope, so that we choose not to give way to despair and resignation that things can never change.

First, that beautiful psalm. It was written to be shared in community, just as we experienced it this morning, a back-and-forth exchange between the priest and the congregation. “Who may dwell on your holy hill? Who may come into the presence of God?” It’s a longing for the kind of community that the psalmist ends up describing.

Our longing is met when we carry hope with us and do not give in to resignation. It’s all about holding tight to a personal commitment to justice and compassion. Walk blamelessly, do righteously, speak the truth, speak no slander, no wrong, no slur. Honour God, keep your promises. Lend money without interest, take no bribes. When we do that, we become house sitters for the presence of the holy.

Then the beatitudes, as they are known. It was a fun moment when I realized that Jesus, in his presentation, was copying exactly what the psalm told him to do. He went up on the mountain, as the psalm instructed, and there, he began to teach. These verses are so poetically beautiful but they also make me feel sort of guilty.

They are so impractical for the world in which we live. I admire the instruction but I fear what it means when I have to put those words into action. We all know that we live in times when the blessings are given to those who succeed, often at the expense of others. To be poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful, and meek will get you nowhere in our world that is filled with both fear and competition.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, and yet, I do a lot day-dreaming that begins with the words "If only..." thinking about the blessings I wish I had more of in my life.

Blessed are those who yearn for justice, but most days, it's not a gnawing rumble in my belly, that makes me take the risk.

I know I should be living for mercy moments when I need to take that deep breath and turn the other cheek. I need to forgive that person who cut me off in traffic, the irritating person who decides to check all her lottery tickets when I am standing behind her holding only a quart of milk and wanting to get on with my chores. Winner-Gagnon... Really?

And even though I go to church, and say my prayers and read the scriptures, I can't help but wonder if my heart is quite pure enough in the eyes of our God.

It's how we see the beatitudes. Jesus never intended them to be like a list we have to check off. I came across an interpretation offered by a man named Charles James Cook. I like his practicality. He says that we need to start reading the beatitudes as a whole, as an invitation to grow closer to our God, because of the longing we hold for a world made in God's sacred image, and not risk losing the meaning or getting confounded as we pull and parse the various sentences. Each statement, he notes, is related to the one before it, and they build on one another, like a progression.

Those who are meek, in other words, those who don't see themselves as the centre of the universe, are more likely to hunger and thirst for what is right and good, because they remain open to a deepening knowledge of God, and they can see the faces of their neighbours in Energy Court. They know they don't have all the answers to what leads to encampments, but they ask, they listen, they choose to dwell in that place of learning, acknowledging the longing for the sacred that they carry inside. And they know that no one should suffer frostbite.

This writer says that Jesus is inviting us to use these beatitudes as a practical tool that can help us simplify and make better sense of the ways we live. And he says that simplicity, hopefulness and compassion are the foundations of this teaching.

When we try to live simply, without so much stuff and so many rules and “shoulds”, when we decide to choose hope over despair or neglect, when we practice small, bold acts of compassion, when we dig deep enough inside so that we see that carrying a grudge is only hurting us and making our backs ache with the heavy burden of the shame, when the better way is to lay the burden down and offer the second chance along with the best intention. Then we can live in the world as a holy people, and we won’t get swallowed up by the world. We learn that we belong to one another, to a holy family. And we listen especially to the voices that are ready to say yes rather than no. The beauty is that we get to see bigger pictures, that new dawn which God has promised, and it’s a very different perspective than a world that operates on competition and fear.

December 29, 2024, when I preached my last sermon – turns out, that wasn’t quite right- I told the congregation that I had come to understand that truth is heard best through a story. If the notion of understanding the beatitudes is not about a checklist, but rather a way to place yourself in the world, taking steps of compassion and hope, then maybe a story will help. Stories help us to lean in, listen deeply and maybe, we begin to glimpse an opportunity.

A woman by the name of Cynthia McGee grew up in the foster care system. Eventually she was adopted and she came to understand that her life had been blessed. Her adoptive parents were good people, and they nurtured her and challenged her in ways so that she grew to understand what a family and responsibility and care for others are all about. Blessed are you, Cynthia.

She also knows that the foster care system does not always shake out that well.

Cynthia met and married a man who agreed to share her dream of becoming foster parents. It wasn’t such a steep curve for her as it was for him. But together, they figured out how to do it. And somewhere along the way, they realized that parents who are forced to relinquish care of their children, and the children themselves, need more than what the system provides.

They noticed that often the parents don't have advocates. All parents want their kids at home. They long to love their children, but sometimes, they don't know how to do it, how to love well.

Cynthia and Mark McGee started parenting classes. Not heavy theory-based classes. But chances for people who longed for reunion, to begin to glimpse hope through small, manageable steps. Cynthia started with meals. Many adults struggle with meal time. Purchasing, preparing and cooking food are complex pieces, and it takes a lot of practice to learn how to time things so that the main course and the veggies get to the plate together. I am grateful that the person who eats the food I prepare when it's my night to cook, believes that green beans can be a great dessert. I never seem to get the handle on the time it takes to cook the veggies.

Cynthia wants the parents to know that someone believes they can do it. The couple opened a visitation centre, by adapting their garage. They made it look like a little house, not the bare room in the Children's Aid office where visits normally take place. There was a little kitchen, table and chairs, some comfy places to sit. The parents meet their children for supervised visits in this space with Cynthia and someone from Children's Aid present.

One of the stories she tells is about teaching a dad to have a family meal. He was instructed to bring food to prepare prior to the visit. He showed up with McDonald's chicken nuggets and fries. He left the food in bags and at their first visit, his daughters walked around the room as they ate the food.

For the next visit, Cynthia showed him how to set the table, and be ready when the kids would come. He learned how to put out placemats, forks and knives, plates and glasses. The girls noticed dad's presentation. He set out the chicken nuggets and the fries in bowls on the table, and then he asked his daughters to sit with him and they would eat the food together. It turns out that conversations over meals are skills that need to be actively learned. Week by week, this dad learned how to ask questions, like "What was the best part of your day?", "Who did you eat lunch with at school?" "Tell me what you learned."

The girls couldn't get enough. Cynthia says that there is often a point when she sees the lightbulb go on. Parents figure out what they can do and what family presence is supposed to feel like.

Maybe if Jesus were giving us the teaching of the Beatitudes today, he would tell us not to dissect, but to live them. Practice by listening, by making God's ways your path, not allowing your judgement or the prejudice that is so alive and well now to be the voices that takes up space in your head.

Walk beside and give others a glimpse of the holy light you see. And tell them, always and everyday that no matter what, someone out there believes in them.

Let us pray: We pray with thanks for your vision, Jesus, of the best kind of world, a world made known in holy teaching moments, in all the times when we see your good day dawning in our midst. You have said "Fortunate are the humble-minded, for they will live with possibility. Fortunate, even in their sorrow are those who mourn, for they have loved well, and they come to see the strength you have given them to make their way through. Fortunate are those who practice peace rather than violence. Fortunate are those who have a fire in their belly for they will teach us to speak up and act. Fortunate are the undivided in heart, for they will commit to following the way that leads to God. And fortunate are those who live in your way, for they know what it means to follow a good path, to seek after light, to live their blessings, and create a world according to God's dream of peace for all people." May it be so. Amen.

(Sources Used: Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, pages 296-313; Magnolia, Winter 2022; Kneeling In Bethlehem, Anne Weems, Westminster Press, 1980, p. 65)