FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | FEBRUARY 1, 2026
MICAH 6:1-8 | PSALM 15 | 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31 | MATTHEW 5:1-12

"This is what happens when people stop being polite and start being real." That was the tag line of a new show on MTV in the early 90s called—fittingly enough—"The Real World."

The premise of the show was that seven people in their early twenties would live in a big apartment in a city, argue over who left dishes in the sink, date and break up with each other, and work made up part-time jobs, all while they were being filmed for national television.

Even if you've never seen the show—you're not missing much—you've probably used the phrase in conversation. When a high schooler gets their first paycheck and learns about payroll taxes, *Welcome to the real world.* When a college student has to figure out how to do their own laundry, *Welcome to the real world*. When the thirty-something pastor stops getting invites to young clergy meetings—hypothetical!—*Welcome to the real world.*

The real world is a whole set of assumptions about the way the world operates. What you can expect out of other people. What you should get used to as "normal." What you can expect out of life.

The situations in which we deploy that phrase are different. But they all have the same general meaning. We use it to mean "lower your expectations." "Get over yourself." "Stop thinking the world is here to make you happy." No one says, "Welcome to the real world" when you win the lottery.

You could imagine Jesus beginning his ministry by giving his own "Welcome to the Real World" speech, too. Those who mourn will get some tissues and a few bereavement days. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will continue to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Those who are merciful are suckers who will get taken advantage of. Those who are pure in heart are naïve about the world. Those who are peacemakers need to get their head out of the clouds.

Instead, Jesus spends his first big speech in Matthew's gospel announcing a different kind of social order. No sooner does Jesus tell us that the kingdom of heaven is imminent than he describes what that means for us. Those who weep will be consoled. Those who are upset by the injustices of the world will be comforted. Those who forgive will receive forgiveness. Those who are persecuted in their pursuit of God's mercy will be vindicated. It is these people will be blessed or, as some translations put it, "happy."

What Jesus offers us here is not an analysis of the way the world works. He is not describing the way things tend to operate. The meek are often not comforted. Those who hunger are not fed. Those who are persecuted are not vindicated. Instead, he's telling us what the new reality of the kingdom of God is like. And it's these people, the meek, the disconsolate, the pure in heart, the persecuted, the people who join Jesus on this mountainside who will experience the kingdom of heaven first.

In other words, Jesus invites us to look at everything that is to come—his ministry, his teaching, his healing, his passion, his resurrection—and says, "This is the real world."

The Beatitudes remind us that there is a difference between realism and resignation. Realism means describing the world the way it is. Being clear-eyed. Honest. Factual. These are the problems we encounter in our lives, our neighborhoods, our nation, and our world. We weep. We hurt one another. We get stuck in cycles of violence. We persecute and revile other people. Jesus is very frank about all that.

But Jesus doesn't give into resignation. He doesn't assume that these problems are intractable. As if to believe in the power of forgiveness, the value of humility, and the worth of other people is just a childhood fantasy we need to grow out of.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is the real world. The real world is not how much wealth you can hoard. It's how generous you can be toward others. The real world is not how many arguments you can win. It's how many people you can grow to care about. The real world is not about how many titles and awards you can accumulate. It's how many neighbors we can serve. The real world is not valuing convenience above all else. It's being upset at the right things.

St. Paul tells us as much in today's epistle reading. You, he tells the Corinthians, are not wise. You are not powerful. You are not from an important family. You all look like a bunch of fools. I imagine the Corinthians interrupted here and said, "Okay, we get it!"

But, he goes on, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world… to abolish things that are."

Paul offers us a beatific—a beatitude—vision of God at work. If you want to see the power of God, look at the ways God works in you. You don't appear to be all that important or famous or influential or wealthy. But God does not work through appearances. God works through the crucified and risen body of Christ. That's what's real. That's what's lasting. That's what holds on to you when everything else falls away.

We participate in that same reality that whenever we gather at font and table where, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is present within and among us. Where we become Christ's beatific community.

We may be merciful. We may be mourning. We may be hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Some of us may even be reviled. But when we gather at Christ's table, we become blessed. Because in Christ's presence, we are comforted, filled, forgiven, and called God's children.

This is my body, Jesus declares. Welcome to the real world.

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