

SERMON

Pastor James Bauman

Immanuel Lutheran Church - Bartlett, Illinois

Epiphany 4, A, February 1, 2026

Micah 6:1-8, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Matthew 5:1-12

Mark was a young pastor out to change the world.

He had just received his first Call to a struggling congregation that had requested a fresh seminary graduate,

He came into the congregation with passion and determination.

He was going to help “these people” get it right and get things turned around.

He preached about taking faith seriously and about finally understanding and living what it meant to be a Christian.

But by the second month almost everyone in the congregation was irritated with him or intimidated by him.

He talked about grace, but somehow it always came out like law. Following Jesus seemed always to cause feelings of failure and guilt rather than feelings of being with a divine Friend and Savior.

One afternoon while in the home of Mildred, an older homebound member,

Pastor Mark was grumbling about one of the members of the Church Council.

It seemed to him that no one in the church was responding the way he would like, but that council member Donna seemed to be an especially persistent thorn in his side.

After listening to the young pastor complain and complain about how basically un-Christian this woman was in her attitudes, Mildred interrupted him.

“Do you know anything about her?” she asked

“I know that she seems pretty annoying and hasn’t done much to help lead this congregation in the couple of months that I have been here,” the pastor replied.

“Well, Donna is my sister-in-law,” said Mildred.

“And two weeks before you got here she was diagnosed with cancer and told that there was little point in doing anything about it— it was too far advanced. You want her to help you out with how she lives her faith, and right now she is trying to figure out how to die.”

Mark felt embarrassed and humbled.

Soon after his preaching changed. His demeanor changed.

His fervor continued but it came out more as love and concern for people rather than a need to judge and condemn them.

It was only by feeling like a **fool** that Mark could finally encounter the **wisdom** of God at work in his life.

The Second Reading reminds us of how God uses what is weak in this world to shame the strong.

God uses the foolish-sounding message of the Cross to save people.

Notice how The Beatitudes, spoken by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, proclaim similar surprising reversals which come with the reign of God.

What seems weak and hopeless knows the blessing of God in the new order of things....

I was struck by the story of you Pastor Mark. The lessons for today allow for two different approaches in a sermon.

Certainly that reading from Micah could be used raise guilt levels and to

condemn people.

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

And certainly, we Christians need to be **actively** concerned when we hear of overwhelming needs and unimaginable pain that we can help to alleviate--among both near-by and global neighbors.

Much has always been done by Christians.

Like the first hospitals and schools in our own area. But more can always be done. In the words of Jesus Himself,

“The poor you will always have with you.”

In the face of the enormity of the ever-present problems, it is easy for caring Christians to be made to feel guilty.

But does condemning the very people who do care about such things and often feel overwhelmed and helpless especially as they face their own personal issues really help?

Even the beautiful words of blessing in the Beatitudes can be received in two ways.

“Blessed are those who....”

For those who see themselves in his words, Jesus brings divine comfort.

But for the rest, those who are haughty, for example, or those who do **not** hunger or thirst for righteousness, or those who create hatred or persecute or revile or utter all kinds of evil—for these, the words of Jesus are anything but comforting.

Especially many young, well-intentioned pastors are like Mark—inspired by the Old Testament prophets’ demands for setting the wrong things right in the house of God, and in the larger society.

They often identify real problems. Yet it is also true that no pastor can spend

much time truly being a pastor to people before recognizing that it is all too easy to make judgments-- especially about difficult personalities.

But when what those people are dealing with on a personal level becomes known, those who seem to be devils often look much more like angels—or at least saints as the Bible uses the term.

Very early in my own ministry, I would learn about an impending divorce in the large congregation in which I was serving, and receive information from the view of one of the partners.

Sometimes, what I heard made me feel like I should shoot the other partner. That person was described as basically a despicable devil. But then to my great surprise, when I was able to talk with that partner,

I had to change my mind completely about who was at fault. We all need to be very cautious about judging others. Jesus Himself warns us about that.

Judging right from wrong is another matter. But none of us sees clearly into another's heart; And we seldom know all the complicated circumstances with which another person may be dealing.

I will always remember attending the consecration of a new bishop for the Episcopal Church when I was a young pastor in Memphis, Tennessee.

In his sermon, the Presiding Bishop of that church encouraged the new bishop above all to **be a pastor** to his people. And he added with some sarcasm,

“God knows, this Church has enough prophets.”

It is as a pastor, not as a prophet, that I approach today's lessons. I am looking at the readings with the eyes of one who has seen people struggling and hurting and who has been there at times myself.

So very many people are burdened and disheartened, with issues of health, physical and emotional, with family conflict, with painful concern for a loved one, with financial problems or job problems, with bedeviling personality problems, with scars from past abuse, with addictions, with bitterness, some with anger toward God for what they perceive is a lack

of caring, or what they think is a failure to provide some winning potential in the cards they received, or with other spiritual problems like doubt, or deadness of spirit, or nagging guilt, or disappointment with the Church,

Or with grief from the loss of a loved one that never seems to go away, or the haunting fear of impending death. The fact is that just because I am a pastor I am disinclined to be a fire and brimstone preacher.

That has been to some people's disappointment who have criticized me for it-- often because they know of **others** whom they think need to hear the thunder.

It can be helpful for all of us to hear a fire and brimstone sermon. For example, it is easy for us to become spiritually complacent, a very dangerous state.

But the sermon should not end with fire and brimstone. It seems to me that when I think about the lives of those to whom I am called to minister, there is already **too much of hell**. And our fallen sinful world itself, with all its self-inflicted chaos and pain, is itself a powerful fire and brimstone sermon about what sin brings. And more often than not, I am personally inspired by how well Christians I know are dealing with situations that are overwhelmingly challenging and at times even diabolical-- just as I am personally uplifted by our congregation's continuing determined work in what have been extraordinarily difficult times for all churches.

In addition, like most of you and other Christians, I am already keenly aware myself of the shortcomings in my own life. I need to hear again and again the certain word of forgiveness and grace that over-rules them for needed renewal to go on.

For that reason, also, I want to be sure that grace is the final, last word in what I preach to others.

In that reading from Micah, before the words about what God requires of us comes the **reminder** of what God has done for His people to make them his own.

"For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the land of slavery."

God saved them, not by virtue of what they had done, but by grace.

His concern that they do not wander away from His ways is a concern for their own welfare-- the concern of an amazing, patient love.

It should remind us Paul's New Testament words to the Romans (5:8):

"But God shows his own love for us in this: **While we were still sinners**, Christ died for us." So this day Jesus Himself again asks also to **remember**. Remember His Body given and His Blood shed to redeem us from bondage to sin and death. It is God's own firstborn Son who, by the Cross, has become for us

“.... wisdom from God,

and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.”

Christ crucified-- which can sound so foolish to unbelievers is about the supreme, overriding importance of God's **GRACE for us** in order that, as it is written,

“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

So for all those deep cuts and hurts and disappointments in your life, hear a word of grace.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit....”

In God's reversals of grace, light shines already now on those who feel so often overshadowed—who think of themselves as living in a kind of in darkness.

They receive blessing in the reign of God which Jesus brings.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit....”

When we are **weak**, and as in our weakness we look to the God of all grace, we are strong. When we are **dead in sin**, and so cannot help ourselves at all, the God of all grace makes us alive again.

When we **mourn** over our failings, and feel ripped up on the inside, when we **hunger and thirst for righteousness** in ourselves and in the world

and in the disappointing Church made up of sinners like ourselves, when we desperately yearn for it, we are satisfied with **mercy** that is bigger than any emptiness or sorrow, and which is a soothing, healing balm for every gaping wound.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.....”

“**Blessed are you who know your need for God....**” is another way of saying that

“**Blessed are YOU who know your need for God.”**

Blessed NOW, not just in heaven someday. Because God sees your need, and cares, and has already loved you with love that is higher than the heavens—with grace—all undeserved, beyond deserving, as a pure and free gift, just because.... that is the way God is.

God is one with Jesus and revealed in Jesus. And Jesus is the Friend of Sinners especially the Friend of those who recognize that they **are** sinners.

Let’s remember today, and remember how God can use even hurts in amazing ways. Remember the Cross which appears to many as foolishness.

Remember grace. And THEN—freed from the burdens of guilt, fears, gnawing anxieties, and made new in divine love--**then** go out and seek to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

And **then** the peace of God, which far surpasses human understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.