

## Serving Serves

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, February 1, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Matthew 5:1-12](#) and [Micah 6:1-8](#)

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Our reading from Matthew is one of the more familiar passages of that gospel. If you're new to Christianity, you might have heard of "the beatitudes" before. That's what you heard today. They are the beginning of a three-chapter section of the gospel known as "the sermon on the mount." It's called that because, when Jesus sees the crowds that have gathered around him, Matthew says he "went up the mountain."

Many biblical scholars see this going up the mountain to be one more in a series of things Matthew does in the first chapters of his gospel to establish Jesus as a "new Moses." Jesus going up the mountain to teach is like Moses going up Mount Sinai to commune with God and coming down the mountain with the Ten Commandments.

Jesus' audience is a little unclear. Matthew says that Jesus' disciples came to him and he starts teaching them. So, it seems like Jesus is teaching his inner circle, but not in private. The crowds are looking on and listening in. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew says "the crowds were astonished at his teaching." We can assume they've been listening in.

It's interesting how Jesus begins this teaching. Jesus doesn't offer his disciples a "how to" manual. Jesus begins with the benediction. He begins by noticing how God is blessing the people. This is not a litany of religious "shoulds." It's a litany of "congratulations." It is a map of who is truly blessed, not a set of instructions about how to acquire divine blessing. Jesus sees the crowd, which is probably made up mostly of common folk, people who tried to get by with whatever labor they could find, hoping it paid enough to feed their family that day. Jesus sees the crowd and he sees people who are poor, who are mourning, who are gentle, who are hungry, who are merciful, who are pure in heart, who are peacemakers, who are persecuted and reviled. And he tells these people that they are blessed.

One commentary points out, "(for all you grammar nerds), the grammatical mood of Jesus' language here is indicative, not imperative: he's describing how the world actually is, not issuing instructions. This is all the more striking because we might expect Jesus, precisely as a 'New Moses,' to deliver a list of 'thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not' akin to the commandments Moses delivers at Mount Sinai. And yet that is precisely what Jesus does not do. Instead, he begins with blessing."<sup>1</sup> He begins with good news.

"Micah (whose name means, "Who is like God?") was a prophet roughly contemporary with Isaiah, living in a time of major socio-economic change in Judah, including an increasing gap between rich and poor (sound familiar?). He was especially

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<sup>1</sup> "Blessing First: SALT's Commentary for Epiphany 4," *Salt Project*, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/1/28/blessing-first-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-4> (posted and accessed on 26 January 2026).

concerned with injustice, and in particular, with idolatrous corruption among the religious and political powers that be.”<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Jesus in Matthew’s gospel, Micah *does* give a list of instructions. Micah’s list, however, is like Jesus’ beatitudes in that they are not transactional. Micah is not saying, “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, and God will bless you.” Micah says that you (we) know already what the most fitting response to the blessings God has already given is.

For Micah, too much Israelite religion in his day (and we might add, too much Christian religion in our day) involves coming before God with “sacrifices” and “offerings” – as if God will “be pleased” with our gifts. Micah reminds his people and us that God is the giver of all good things in the first place, that God’s generosity and grace come first. “The proper human role, then, is not to pretend to be God’s benefactor, or to attempt to earn or maneuver into God’s good graces, but rather to recognize that we are God’s continual beneficiaries, called to gratefully live out responsive, fully human lives of justice, kindness, and humility.”<sup>3</sup>

We’ve been receiving a crash course in what it means to “do justice” this month – well, for the past several months. The “No Kings” Days have been powerful. 7 million people turning out to speak truth to power. Dr. Timothy Snyder, an expert on tyranny, says that the No Kings Days have done two important things: they lifted our spirits as we made connections with neighbors, and they “slowed things down.”

The first of those is not trivial. In fact, there is evidence that while “activists, organizers, mutual aid workers and volunteers are setting out to change the world for the better – [they are] finding that the connections they make and the larger purpose they connect to often helps make their own lives better, too....

“In the context of a society so fractured that former surgeon general Vivek Murthy declared a ‘loneliness epidemic’ ... movement-building spaces are offering people unique opportunities to connect to others and [to] a sense of purpose.”<sup>4</sup>

In a recent interview, Dr. Snyder said, “If it hadn’t been for No Kings, I think things would be a lot worse than they are now. That demonstration effect slows them down.... You protest to slow them down. You protest so you show people around you that what’s happening isn’t normal and that what you’re doing is normal and protest is normal. And you protest ... to make new connections.”<sup>5</sup>

Portland and Chicago and Los Angeles and Minneapolis and Maine have shown us and are showing us that demonstrations planned out weeks in advance are one step, and that immediate response is another. Dr. Snyder looks at it this way: “[W]hen there’s a wound, you’ve got to be around that. You got to surround that. And you have to react and

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Whitney Bauck, “‘We have to go out and touch people’” how activism is tackling the US loneliness epidemic,” *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jan/05/loneliness-social-movements-community-purpose> (posted 5 January 2026; accessed 31 January 2026).

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Timothy Snyder, in an interview on 30 January 2026 aired on Substack, <https://snyder.substack.com/p/my-conversation-with-ava-duvernay> (accessed that day).

you have to be stubborn. But this is where I take Minneapolis as good news. I mean, horrible things happen. But people there who had not been protesting and who were in no way organized before this showed that Americans can do that, showed that Americans can organize locally.”<sup>6</sup>

Now, as I say this, I want to make sure you know that there are lots of ways to “do justice.” The military actually studies how many support troops it takes to support the combat troops. They call this the tooth-to-tail ratio. In World War II, the tooth-to-tail ration was 1:4.3. In Vietnam, the tooth-to-tail ration was 1:12.9.<sup>7</sup>

When protesting the powers that be, there is a similar ratio. The people who are on the front lines need support. And the more dangerous the action (that is, the greater the likelihood of arrest or violence), the greater the needs for support activists doing everything from childcare to legal support to posting bail to supplying handwarmers to donating money.

And the risk for being on the front line varies from person to person. I have a friend who has some weird eye issues that are already threatening her ability to see. She has no idea how damaging to her eyesight exposure to teargas might be. Plus, she has three teenage kids. She’s not going to be on the front lines. Which is good because she is a great public speaker and the movement needs people who can articulate to the public what’s happening and why.

My point here is that we have a pretty good idea of what doing justice looks like.

When it comes to walking humbly – that’s where I stumble. I’ve got some ego stuff going on when I contemplate participating in civil disobedience. I recently heard a reflection on Micah 6:8 by the Rev. Shari Prestemon that I found helpful. She said, “What ... the walking humbly with God is meant to remind us of is that it’s not just our hands and feet and voices that are getting the job done, but that we are vehicles, we are instruments, and that all along the way, no matter what the faith is that we claim, we trust as we walk and as we pray and as we witness and as we protest that somehow God is the one who’s carving a way through the mess, that God can do it, even while we know that God also needs us to get it done. So that’s the humility part. But let’s not mistake it ... for being meek and mild and quiet. So, the call of this scripture is to trust God and remember we are God’s instruments and to also to do justice and love kindness and to grow a spine.”<sup>8</sup>

There’s one line in what she said that I think needs to be unpacked a bit. She said, “But let’s not mistake [the humility part] ... for being meek and mild and quiet.” If you were listening carefully to the beatitudes, you will remember that one of them is, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” The word in Matthew’s gospel that gets translated as “meek” is not the same as the “meek” that Rev. Prestemon was referring to. In fact, there

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> “Tooth-to-tail ratio,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tooth-to-tail\\_ratio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tooth-to-tail_ratio) (accessed 31 January 2026).

<sup>8</sup> Rev. Shari Prestemon reflecting on Micah 6:8 in a video posted on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/reel/2115174945907740> by the United Church of Christ Washington D.C. Office on 30 January 2026.

are plenty of English translations of Matthew that render this verse as “Blessed are the gentle ...” and a bunch more that translate it as “Blessed are the humble ...”

The American English understanding of “meek” has moved some in the past 400 years. Now we hear “meek” as meaning “milquetoast,” which is *not* what Micah meant.

Walking humbly with God means walking with gentleness. And when I think about who is literally walking humbly with God, I think of the Buddhist monks who are walking from Fort Worth, Texas, to Washington, D.C. You can’t be milquetoast and take on a 2300-mile trek. You can be humble and do it. In fact, one of the reasons I think their Walk for Peace is inspiring people is because they are doing it with humility.

Which brings us to “loving kindness.” A dozen years ago, author George Saunders gave a commencement address at the Syracuse University College of Arts and Sciences. He started out by talking about his regrets in life, and he said, “What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness. Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly.”<sup>9</sup>

He asked the audience. “Who, in your life, do you remember most fondly, with the most undeniable feelings of warmth? Those who were kindest to you, I bet. “It’s a little facile, maybe, and certainly hard to implement, but I’d say, as a goal in life, you could do worse than: Try to be kinder.”<sup>10</sup>

“Start right now,” he advised. “Because kindness, it turns out, is hard – [because] it starts out all rainbows and puppy dogs, and [then it] expands to include, well, everything.”<sup>11</sup>

I think it’s important to note that there’s a difference between being *kind* and being *nice*. Comedian Trevor Noah offers this explanation of the difference: “When someone has something on their face and no one tells them, it’s very nice to not tell them, ‘You have something on your face.’ Don’t tell them [and] you’re being nice. It’s better to be kind to me [and say,] ‘Hey, man, your face.’” He notes that the kind thing to do is to “embrace the discomfort” and tell the truth.<sup>12</sup>

Noah also notes that in many languages other than English, when Americans use the English word *kind*, they use a word that is closer in meaning to *generosity* or *service*. He points out that the English word *kind* comes from *kindred*. “I think [this] gives us an insight into what might be missing in today’s world,” Noah says. He points out that “when we are saying we are being kind to one another ... [we’re saying] I’m seeing you as me, and I’m believing that you are seeing me as you.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> George Saunders convocation speech at the Syracuse University College of Arts and Sciences on 11 May 2013, posted on YouTube, [https://youtu.be/rujWd\\_m-LgY](https://youtu.be/rujWd_m-LgY), 2 August 2013; accessed 30 January 2026.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Trevor Noah in conversation with Simon Sinek in the YouTube video, “True Kindness is Uncomfortable,” <https://youtu.be/a-Qhz-X8Ws0>, posted sometime in January 2026.

<sup>13</sup> Trevor Noah in conversation with Simon Sinek in the YouTube video, “Kindness builds community,” <https://youtu.be/4DmusQyYVuA>, posted sometime in January 2026.

Jesus reminds us that in the midst of whatever it is we're going through, we are blessed. God is loving us, no matter what we're facing, even if it's persecution for righteousness' sake. And because God is loving us, because God is the source of all good things, we can respond.

And Micah reminds us that we respond, not with sacrifices that we think might win God's already-given grace. We respond by engaging with acts of justice. We respond with loving kindness. We respond by continuing our journey humbly and lovingly and courageously.

And when we respond with acts of justice, we build community, we slow down injustice, and we bend the moral arc of the universe in the right direction. All of which makes the world a better place. Serving serves all of us well.

When we respond with acts of loving kindness, we probably have fewer regrets in our lives, we increase the level of honesty in the world, and we discover that we really are all one, all kindred. Serving serves all of us well.

When we respond with a humble, loving, courageous walk with God, we are able to do that other service for the sake of the whole ... which, it turns out, ends up including us. Isn't that a wonderful paradox? When we get our egos out of the way, serving serves everyone, including ourselves.

Micah and Jesus, thanks for the advice.

Amen.