

Good morning. My name is Micah Davis.

As I read through these words from Matthew, one thing in particular stands out to me: Jesus never followed the rules. He is always crossing lines and breaking the expectations that society sets. The Sermon on the Mount is one of the first examples of Jesus not following the norm. Matthew tells us this story right after Jesus has gone out and called his disciples. They have left everything behind to follow a man who aims to show what the reign of God looks like. And Jesus is drawing a lot of attention because he is entering a society with a strict social structure, and he is shaking everything up, making a name for himself. So a crowd gathers around him so they can hear him teach. And then Jesus baffles people, because instead of ushering the crowd into a synagogue or having them follow him to the city square where he can stand above everyone, he goes onto a mountain.

And when he gets to the top of the mountain he quietly sits down and starts teaching. And what he says surprises people again. I imagine that if the Pharisees had followed him onto the mountain that day their jaws would have dropped. “Blessed are the meek? Blessed are those who mourn?” Those were foreign words. Jesus was coming into this place with its set social classes and defined rules and he was breaking them.

Instead of fellowshiping with the rich Jesus goes to a place where the rich would not have followed him, and he says to people, “you are meek, and you will inherit the earth” “you are poor in spirit, and yours is the kingdom of heaven” “you hunger and thirst for righteousness, and you will be filled.” Jesus is not what people expected. He is provocative and irritating and the high and mighty probably don’t like him. , but my guess is that he was fine with that, because his presence was being felt in a way that couldn’t be ignored.

Verses 14-16 tell us to be the light of the world, to shine as brightly as a city on a hill so we cannot be hidden. That is a daunting task. To be bold and bright is frightening, and many times I’m not even sure what it is supposed to look like when I let my light shine. But I think Jesus was showing us during the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus breaks all the rules when he goes onto that mountain, and in the same way we are called to go into uncomfortable and foreign places. Willing to be okay with sideways looks and dismissive murmurs. Jesus did not call Peter or Andrew or James or John or any of the other disciples because he thought they would stick to what society thought was normal and become well liked.

The disciples were not chosen to be popular. And as followers of Christ, popularity is not what we strive for either. We are called to break the rules. To say

things and commit actions that are outside of the norm because often times it is then that we best let our light shine to glorify our father in heaven. And if people scoff and don't accept us into the small, restricted worlds they have created, so what? For Jesus reassured us that day on the mountain, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." So let us go out and be different from what society expects, and in doing so let our lights shine so that we can glorify our father in heaven.

Amen.

Good Morning! My name is Kali Fleagle.

I became a member of this church after asking my mom if we could start going to church here because I loved attending the weekday school. Growing up at this church has brought me many life changing experiences and given me so many wonderful opportunities to grow in my faith and as a Christian. I have become a really faithful person and found this place to be a second home.

As I read through the Beatitudes over and over, one of the verses really spoke to me. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

Pure in heart makes me think of a young child. Carefree, almost always happy, and innocent. The earliest memory I have relates to the idea of pure in heart being a child. When I was 3 years old or so, my Pawpaw was sick and not getting better. He was bed bound at his home in Salisbury, NC. I remember going into his room and on my tippy toes I would walk around singing Jesus Loves Me. I would perform it to him I'm sure multiple times a day when I was there visiting. I know I saw God in that moment and I for sure see it now because he passed away when I was that young. When I sang to him I believe I helped him to see God as well.

This passage also has brought me to remember a more recent memory from one of my most life-changing church trips I was blessed to go on. While I have been on the Presbyterian Youth Council for 3 years now and been to conferences like Montreat and Triennium, nothing will compare to the time I got to spend in Guatemala with our brothers and sisters at Eben-ezer Presbyterian Church last summer.

While I could talk about this trip and all the ways I saw God and felt the Holy Spirit, there is one thing that makes me want to go back and reminds me of this passage. It's this little girl. On our first night of being at the church I was sitting in a

pew close to the front. As I was looking around, taking everything in, this little girl in a blue and purple dress with butterflies on it came and jumped into my arms and gave me the biggest hug I have ever received. That was Andrea. She gave me this friendship bracelet, asked me to come see her house and even brought me seashells from her adventure at the beach. Due to the language barrier, we communicated with peace signs and hearts made by our hands. She even taught me a traditional circle game her and her friends liked to play. I was also given a nickname, grande (which means big) and Andrea would call herself pequeña (which means small). Seeing this soul so pure and so full of life helped me to see myself and God.

As we grow up we sometimes struggle to be pure in heart and struggle to see God. What I think I'm trying to say is that, we are called to be children of God. To be pure in heart. May that be in acting more like a child, remembering who we were as a child or looking at the children around us to see God. Amen.

Good morning! My name is Ethan Banks.

When Jesus saw the crowds, and went up on the mountain, he sat down with his disciples and taught them. He described who would be blessed by God and he taught them how to be a Christian.

But what does “blessed” mean. To me, to be blessed is to be favored or honored by God. I have always felt that I was blessed. I have been blessed with loving, caring parents who have always supported me and encouraged me, even when I didn't think I could do it. I have been blessed with a sister and a brother, who although they sometimes get on my nerves, I know they love me, just as I love them. I have been blessed with a comfortable home, food, clothing, and all the basic things a person needs.

I have been blessed with a wonderful church. I do not remember a time when this church wasn't a part of my life. My family and I started coming to this church when I was 3 years old, when I started the weekday school. I have grown up in this church. I have made many friends, young and old. I know God places certain people in my life at just the right time. I am truly blessed to be graduating this June. My journey through school has not always been an easy one. It's like a rollercoaster. It has had its high points and low points, but with God's help, I have come through it. Yes, I know that I am blessed.

When Jesus says that we are to be salt of the earth and light of the world, I believe that He is saying for me to be as salt, that I have an important job on this earth. Salt is an important seasoning and I am important to God. To be light of the world, tells me that I need to touch the lives of everyone around me, as light does.

At school, I need to be a good witness to Christ. At work, I need to shine with His light. This doesn't mean I have to witness with words so much, but with my actions. I want people to know that I follow Christ by the good things that I do, whether it is to help an elderly person out to their car with their groceries, or if I help a co-worker and make their day a little easier. I do not want to hide my light under a basket, I want to let it shine for everyone to see.

Basically, what this whole passage says to me, is that I have been blessed with many things. Because I am a Christian, I will be blessed in Heaven as well. During my time here on earth, I do not know what my future will hold. None of us do.

I do not know what path I will take after I graduate, whether it be college, work, or volunteering for a bit while I figure it out. What I do know, is that whatever I do, **I will shine with the light that God placed in me.** My parents have instilled in me that God has something wonderful in store for me. I just need to make sure that whatever my future holds, that God is my rock and my foundation. My favorite verse is **Isaiah 40:31. "But those who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not be faint."**

Good morning. My name is Isaac Dannenberg.

For me, my life and existence on this planet has been made up of many questions. Many questions and not a whole lot of answers. The answers that do come are usually pretty vague and they lead to more questions. A lot of these questions revolve around "why do I exist?" "What is my purpose?" and "Who am I?" Who am I in the eyes of other people, in the eyes of myself, and in the eyes of God.

When Jesus sat down and his disciples came to him, I'm sure they also had confusion on just why they were a part of the world. Wondering what their purpose and if they were truly blessed under all circumstances. Jesus reassured them all. He told them they were blessed, no matter what.

Growing up I knew there was something different about me. Thinking back to even my elementary school days, I can remember times where I knew there was something a little off about how I saw things. Middle school came around and that feeling grew to points of complete confusion and frustration. But middle school Isaac had no idea what was happening inside my brain and I didn't really have a place to go. I became a part of this youth group in middle school and it was an awakening of my faith but it brought more questions and frustration.

High school came along and, well, I think of it as when my mind went into a complete disaster. My faith grew and grew and I felt closer to God more than ever, but something was missing. Sometimes I felt like God didn't actually see me, hear me, or knew who I was. I was some sort of silhouette or a shell. Entering high school was scary because at that time I knew what it was about me that made me different. It hit me like a train. Several trains actually. I had to accept the fact that I am gay. It wasn't easy and it got worse for me mentally and emotionally.

Religion and homosexuality has become such a mess. In a way, the church had sometimes ruined it for me, had made me feel worthless, unloved, and a sin to the world. The LGBT community of people gets so much hate. We get violence afflicted among us. We get the worse of religion slammed into our faces. Some people think us existing is the absolute worst thing to ever happen. I breathe and people hate it. Because of that, my connection with God had been fuzzy. It had been interfered with, played with, and even taken away.

Junior year of high school was the hardest for me. I felt alone. I felt empty. There were times where I felt angry, upset, and like I was completely trapped and having to fight my inner demons by myself. It was my rock bottom. I didn't feel like God was there. Of course, summer trips like Montreat and Triennium lifted my spirits because I was with people who were like me. I related to those going through the same kind of thing I was. But afterwards, it was hard to keep that all in my heart. I'm going to be honest, there were times where I hated myself. I did not like what I saw in the mirror. I could name everything I hated about myself and struggle with what I liked.

Reading this passage for the first time made me smile. It made me think. It made me believe. Believe that all those that look down at me are wrong. "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you

falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

I am going to heaven. I am going to the kingdom of God. Because God loves all his children no matter who they are. And people should love one another, support one another, and be there for each other, the way God loves us.

After years of looking at the way my people are treated, I am done. I am done of hiding, done of being someone I am not, and done believing that I am a wrong doing.

Jesus told his disciples that they are blessed no matter what. No matter who they are where they fall on this social pyramid that humanity had created.

Today, after realizing I can't battle my demons, I have a therapist. She is my light and together we go through the darkness. My family loves me and will always support me. My friends love me and will always support me. And I hope that this congregation will continue to love me and support me.

Being gay does not define me. It is about as significant as me liking the color blue. I made a big deal of it, but I am done doing that. Now and forever will I love myself. Even when times are still hard and stress is overwhelming, at the end of the day, I like what I see in the mirror. I am proud of myself.

And I know that God is proud too. As I move into the next stage of my life, my faith will be stronger than ever. I am blessed. I am a light in this world. I am salt of the earth. I am a son of God. Forever and always.

Amen.