

Sunday's Sermon

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

250 Fox Hill Road ■ Hampton, Virginia 23669

February 1, 2026

The Reverend David E. Fox

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (Year A) 2026
Matthew 5.1-12

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Did you know that in the state of Washington it is a felony to kill Bigfoot? In Rhode Island, it is illegal to bite off another person's limb, punishable up to twenty years. In the state of Pennsylvania, you cannot barter your infant children. In California, it is illegal to eat a frog that died in a frog-jumping contest. And in the state of Louisiana, it is illegal to wrestle with bearsⁱ. Laws, though sometimes odd, are ideally created to keep folks safe and to keep people in right relationship with one another. I believe that laws also help us to understand that life and relationships are more important than capital gain, though we don't always live that way in practice.

There are six-hundred thirteen commandmentsⁱⁱ or laws found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy for the Hebrew people to follow. There is said to be six-hundred fourteen laws when you add the law: AND don't you forget them. We Christians would struggle to fulfill six-hundred thirteen laws, as we truly struggle to know and to fulfill ten of those laws, found in the Ten Commandments that were given to Moses. However, these laws were given in order for folks to remain safe and to keep people in right relationship with self, others, creation, and God. They were also given to help us see that relationships are more important than things and money.

In our readings from Micah, we have some other commandments or laws that we are introduced to. What does the Lord require of you? Do justice, love kindness (or mercy), and to walk humbly with your God. The prophet has summed up six-hundred thirteen laws with a small grouping of "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." To live into these three commands, one can more easily fulfill the other commands, though falling short will certainly continue to happen. The "I can't" reassures us that "God can." God never breaks a covenant, but God's people continually are not holding up their end of the bargain. We need something else besides commandments, laws, and more rules. Sure, these commandments are with good intention to help us to remain safe, to keep people in right relationship with self, others, creation, and God. However, more rules or commandments aren't going to help us to follow those that already exist.

On a day when we celebrate Scouting, this matters. Scouting is often associated with rules, badges, and expectations—but at its heart, it's about formation. It's about shaping people over time: learning responsibility, practicing service, failing safely, trying again, and growing in relationship

with others. At its best, Scouting isn't about perfection or checking boxes; it's about learning how to live well with others in the world.

I remember in a former call that there were a lot of unwritten rules. I'm certain we've never seen anything like that at Gloria Dei [*sarcasm here*]. When it came to what you all call the Hanging of the Greens, there were certain people at this particular church to do certain things a certain way. And yet, they couldn't for the life of them figure out why no one else wanted to join them to set up their decorations. One year, I made a push for new folks to come in, allowing for new ideas, and for more people to help out, and do you know what happened? The new people stood to the side, while those who had always hung the decorations continued to do it their certain way. Of course, the new people did not return for a second year to stand around and watch others do what they've always done the way they've always done it before. Rules, laws, commandments are overwhelming and they make people nervous. Sure, the church looked nice as it had for the past two-hundred-forty-some-odd years, it kept the process smooth, it helped get the job done quickly; but it failed to build new relationships. Those who wanted to be a part of the process did not need another list of rules to follow. Rather, they needed and wanted to be a part of community.

I'm giving credit to Leonard Sweet in what I'm about to say. If we take Micah's commands to walk humbly, to do justice, and to love mercy and pair with Jesus' words in John 14, when he says, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life," we get a sense of what is needed rather than more laws. When we put Jesus' words with Micah's command from God, we get the Way of humility, the Truth of justice, and the Life of mercy. God doesn't send us more laws, rather God sends us a person – a saviorⁱⁱⁱ.

So, in our Gospel reading from Matthew, we have what is commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes. Jesus is sometimes referenced as the new Moses. And this is the story that causes folks to make such a reference. Instead of Mt. Saini, we have this nameless mount and instead of Ten Commandments written on stone tablets, Jesus has eight beatitudes to share with those who are there learning from him. (Side note here: there are nine "Blessed" statements, but scholars have long argued that the ninth blessed is not an actual beatitude.)

The beatitudes are less about rules and more about relationship. In these eight beatitudes, we don't have language of don't do this, or it is illegal to do that, rather we have the word "blessed" – some translations use the word "happy," which may be a stretch – the word can mean fortunate or rich. By being these things, we are the fortunate and we are the rich, though not in terms of wealth, rather with relationship.

Rich are we when we are poor in spirit. Rich are we when we mourn. Rich are we, who are meek. Rich are those of us who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Rich are we when we are merciful. Rich are we, who are pure of heart. Rich are we who are peacemakers of this world. Rich are we when we are persecuted for righteousness' sake. We are rich or fortunate in all of these things, because they draw us into relationship with God's community and with Jesus the Christ – when we are weak, He is strong. It is living through these weak moments where we see the strength of relationships, especially our relationship to Christ our Lord. In our weaknesses, we become more aware that possessions in this world are worthless in comparison to relationships.

Scouting, at its best, understands something Scripture knows well: formation takes time, practice, and community. You don't become trustworthy, brave, or generous overnight. Those things are learned, tested, and deepened through relationships. The gospel tells us that God is doing something similar—but deeper still. God is forming hearts shaped by humility, mercy, and justice. And unlike Scouting, where advancement is earned, God's formation begins with grace. We don't start by proving ourselves; we start by being claimed.

As a Christian people, we should cling to the truly important things in life, which are relationships. God's laws are meant to keep us in right relationship with God, with creation, with others, and with ourselves. And when we continue to get it wrong, Jesus is there showing us the Way of humility, the Truth of justice, and the Life of mercy.

Blessed are you, just as you are, because God is forming you—one step, one stumble, and one act of love at a time.

ⁱ <https://www.usatoday.com/list/news/nation-now/weirdest-laws-every-state/53ad0541-3518-4432-adc4-ofec193d389e/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.jmu.edu/dukehallgallery/exhibitions-past-2018-2019/the-613-mitzvot.shtml>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-sA1U1UZY4> Not Just the Red Letters | Leonard Sweet, LenTalk#149, PreachTheStory, Lectionary Semiotics, 29JAN23