

Matthew 5:1-12

5:1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

5:2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5:4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5:5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

5:8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

5:10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5:11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

5:12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

There's a special invitation in this time as we read the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew puts this collection of Jesus' teachings right at the beginning of the story, and it's a good entry point. Just before this, Jesus called his first disciples, turning fishermen into fishers of men, and bringing them from the shores of the sea to the base of the mountain. There's a holy journey that they have taken together, and a pause, and then Jesus says what he came here to say.

It's really important that Jesus was not in the synagogue as he was before and as he would be again. Jesus begins his teaching at the mountain, in a wild and holy place, giving us a hint that this teaching is new and different.

It also gives us a hint of who else we know is associated with mountains - Moses came down from the mountains to give the ten commandments, and in Matthew, Jesus is at the mountain to deliver the sermon on the mount.

The tablets of the law and the words of the sermon on the mount could serve as the distilled version of the Old and New testaments. Law, and gospel. God's plan for us - the commandments - and Jesus' teaching on God's plan to us. This is God's plan, and the way Jesus is enacting that plan is by making disciples and teaching it to us, so that we can do the work to bring God's plan to fruition. It's both a lesson and a promise.

The beatitudes are incredible. They are a gift, and they are an invitation. Jesus is saying that THIS is God's mission statement on earth. Those who need help will receive it. And it is Jesus' foundational instructions to the disciples on how to be righteous.

If you want to be righteous too, this is what we should do.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This world lifts up the rich, and the powerful, and the spiritual who have it all together. Right? We give over our time and attention and money to those who look and sound like they've got it figured out. And sometimes we even commit the sin of thinking that because someone has money, or power, that they are righteous.

Jesus says: no. Those things might look like blessings, but the blessing that is the kingdom of heaven is for the poor in spirit.

If you are struggling right now, if you spiritually not ok and you need the assurance that God is with you - know this. You are who Jesus is specifically reaching out to. Jesus is promising that the kingdom of heaven IS for you.

5:4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

In this world we also are uncomfortable with people who grieve openly. The cultural expectation is that we stay positive, that we hide our hurts, and that we don't bring our personal sadness with us into the world. There's no publically recognized ritual or space for mourning. And when we aren't perfectly positive, we are told that our emotions are too much.

And yet, Jesus says to bless those who mourn, for they will be comforted. The ones whose loss is hard to look at. The ones who are a raw nerve. The ones who can't turn the pain or illness they are going through into a positive journey, but instead, struggle with every step. This is where we as disciples are called to go - to run towards the pain of this world, and to be comfort. And I want to say something about comfort that I learned from our own Sallie Shippen - comfort is not telling someone platitudes, or glossing over pain, or looking on the bright side. I'm paraphrasing here, but Jesus did NOT say, blessed are those who mourn, for they will be told to snap out of it. No. Comfort is recognizing and identifying with someone else and

acknowledging where they are at. Comfort sounds like: wow, that is awful. I'm so sorry. How do you feel? What can I do for you?

This is really hard. Comforting another person is being willing to see the fullness of their pain, and ensure they are not alone there. And that is the promise that Jesus is giving us: when you are in mourning, you will not be alone.

5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

This is the heart of the message. Jesus is leading us into this concept - righteousness. What righteousness is, and who has it, was the major religious debate of His time. He's teaching around the concept of righteousness to show us how to be righteous, and he's encouraging us to need righteousness as much as we need food to eat and water to drink.

Can you think of how hungry we must be for righteousness? We have to want it, not in our brains, but in our mouth - to imagine righteousness on your tongue, to smell it, to desire it.

Augustine said about the eucharist, "behold what you are, become what you receive." Can you imagine if we thought this way about righteousness? Behold it, to ingest it, and to become it? It must be like our daily bread.

So what is righteousness? It is this concept that Jesus brings us back to over and over, saying our righteousness must be greater than scribes and Pharisees. It is the social norm for the community of disciples and it is a high standard - we don't have to have external piety, but we have to hunger and thirst for God to work through us to change the world. To be righteous is to do the will of God. So to be righteous, we have to 1. Desire it always and 2. Try to understand the will of God.

5:5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Who inherits the earth now? Who owns land? This question is powerfully valid right now - I think of the struggle that the Sioux people have been waging over their treaty lands at Standing Rock. I think about how we define sovereignty, and borders, and rights to use the earth for our gain.

Who should we give the earth to? Jesus says, to the meek. And not meek like, timid, more like, powerless. This is when Jesus shows us what he is about - turning the current power structure upside-down. And that's what the rest of the beatitudes show us also: we do not need to be interested in what the world puts first. To be righteous, we have to follow where Jesus is leading, and turn upside-down the structures of this world.

5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

5:8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

5:10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

To be persecuted is to be harassed or oppressed for religious or political beliefs. On Friday, our President signed an executive order stating that effective immediately, certain kinds of people are no longer welcome in this country. The order targets Muslims, Syrian refugees, and those from Muslim-majority countries without strong business ties to the US.¹ Nevermind that foreign nationals from those countries have not been shown to be a higher risk for criminal activity. We saw yesterday that immediately, the effect has been that people who are US green card

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2017/01/trump-immigration-order-muslims/514844/>

holders - our allies in the Iraq war - were detained without due process. Others have also been detained without due process at airports around the country, including SeaTac, and ten thousand people went there last night to protest for the rights of these who have been detained.

Immigration lawyers and historians have pointed out that this sweeping order is unprecedented in its scope and target. America has never been a country to use the authority of the law to ban people based on religion or nationality. Friends, I am chilled to the bone. I am completely disturbed that we would be a people that would allow a ban to any religious group, but especially to our Muslim neighbors, who we learned in our recent Islam class is a religion of peace. It is a shadow over all of us to turn away either refugees or anyone on the basis of religion.

Friday was also Holocaust Remembrance Day. We can never forget, because the Holocaust was a war crime writ large, and it was a time when good people failed to act. During the persecution of Europe's Jewish Population, when so many became refugees, there are so many horrible stories when countries didn't act. I was ashamed again to read on Friday that Anne Frank's family had applied for refugee status in America, and they were rejected. We rejected them.

The sparks of hope that exist when we remember the horrors of the Holocaust are the whispered stories about neighbors hiding neighbors, about people being snuck across borders, about government agents not seeing what they have been ordered to see. There is ² a small exhibit at Temple Emmanu-El in New York right now, that showcases stories during the Holocaust where Muslim neighbors were the ones to bring Jewish people to safety. One woman, Johanna Neumann, tells the story of how her family escaped Germany when she was just 9 years old and fled to Albania - a Muslim country in the Balkans where they didn't speak the language or know anybody. The Pilku family took them in, and despite having an outward obedience to the German soldiers, they hid them and said they were visiting cousins for six years. For six years! Can you imagine having

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/14/holocaust-survivor-saved-by-muslim_n_5316603.html
<http://time.com/4651298/holocaust-memorial-day-muslims-jews/>

strangers as houseguests for six years, and putting your life on the line for them? That is what the Pilku family did, and by that, the Neumanns were saved.

I have a friend named Gabe Brunswick. He is not a risk-taker, you know, he plays it safe. He's a bankruptcy lawyer in New York, and y'know, a corporate type. He was eating brunch yesterday, and he heard about the detentions and went directly to JFK. He ended up in Terminal 8 with a sign saying "Immigration Lawyer, do you need help?" and met a woman whose sister was on a flight from London and being detained. They were going to send her away, on a flight to Doha, Qatar. Gabe connected between her, and a flight attendant who could get into the area behind security, and the "real" immigration lawyers, and they filed an emergency stay at a Federal court in Eastern New York. The stay was granted, and by the grace of God the woman's sister, who is blind, is wheeled out in her wheelchair by the sympathetic flight attendant. She and her sister are reunited.

That is what it means to be persecuted for righteousness sake. It means that the expected behavior of righteousness for Jesus' disciples is to stand up to the powers of this world, and to subvert them when they are wrong.

5:11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Be hungry and thirsty for righteousness. Because blessing on blessing will rain down on us and the whole world when we seek first for righteousness, and when we act for the persecuted, and when we proclaim mercy.