

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, January 22, 2023

Matthew 5:1-16

Our second lesson comes from the gospel according to Matthew. As we continue in the Narrative Lectionary, we're in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. This is the very beginning of what will come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount. So in this first sermon of Jesus—he's been teaching, kind of going throughout the countryside healing many people. He's got himself a small following at this point, folks who are somewhat compelled by this message that he is carrying with him; but what he notices on this day is this large crowd that's gathered on a hillside. So they sit down and he begins to preach to them. That's where we enter—first verse of the fifth chapter.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘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.

‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

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The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So Jesus begins this Sermon on the Mount with blessings.

We hear these early teachings of Jesus about the poor in spirit and those who grieve, about the meek, those who are pure in heart, about those who would strive to be peacemakers. Those are important lessons. I encourage you to reflect on them this week. I think often we, we read them as personal reflections, that each of us individually is one of these perhaps on our best days.

But more so than that, Jesus is beginning this Sermon on the Mount by describing a divine communal framework. He has come that we might know that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near, and if that is the case, then what is the framework for community?

Jesus begins by sharing what it looks like to be the community of God, the faithful community. The faithful community of God will be those who are poor in spirit because theirs will be the kingdom of heaven. The faithful community of God will be those who mourn, not just their own personal grief but mourn with their community. The faithful people of God will be meek. They will inherit the earth. The faithful people of God will have a hunger and a thirst for righteousness. The faithful people of God will be merciful. The faithful people of God will be pure in heart however difficult that sounds. They will be peacemakers in a world bent on destroying itself, and they will be persecuted, it says. The persecution isn't all that detailed, but what Jesus seems to be laying out is that if you live out this community in the world, there will be resistance to this community.

“People will revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you,” he says, “on my account.” On Jesus's account.

When that happens, when you don't find that great treasure here in the world, know that your reward is great in heaven.

And then he says this. There's no caveat here before he begins, but there is something intrinsic to what he's saying here. He lays out what community looks like, and then he moves on to say that you are the salt of the earth, and then later you are the light of the world. He tells this community trying to figure out what it means to follow in the ways of love and grace in the world that they are salt, that they are light.

There's this particular gift you will have, Jesus says, when you embody this framework of community. There's a particular gift, and that gift will be light. You will shine before others, giving a beacon of hope in a world deeply in need. There's also a particular responsibility. If light dwells within you, then it is your job, your calling, to illumine the world.

So for the next few minutes, we'll unpack the gift and the responsibility. First the gift, the gift of light dwelling within each of us. Jesus is unequivocal in his framework. You are the light of the world, you. Those who are following me, who are seated trying to listen and be my disciples,

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you are the light of the world. There is a divine spark that dwells within you. You are bearers of the light of Christ. Can you imagine how that must have felt?

Because they came from all sorts of different backgrounds to hear him, you imagine some in desperation, some in hurt and grief, others needing a word of hope. They lived in a community that had uneven power dynamics. They were people of the empire. Some probably didn't have full bellies when they made their way to the hillside that day. Others were trying to navigate what it looked like to be in relationship, maybe with the spouse or with children, others with people that they worked alongside. And Jesus says, "You are a bearer of the light of God."

Marianne Williamson has an off-quoted description of this light. She says, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us." Perhaps you've heard it before in the movie *Coach Carter* or quoted elsewhere. "We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?" Williamson says, "You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us: it is in everyone. And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." Jesus has come to give a word of liberation to the people

You might not know it, but you, in fact, are the light of the world. That is the gift. When you know great darkness, difficulty, when you know frustration and broken relationships, you are still liked, and others are as well. Each of us, children of God, and if that's the gift, then what is the responsibility? The responsibility is to bear that light in the world, to illumine the darkness. That might sound beyond our imagining, but if we are to think more specifically with it, to illumine the darkness, to shine light, is to move in the world with truth and with meekness and with love, with the hunger for righteousness. To illumine the darkness is to give shape by our witness to the broken and evil realities around us. To call forth light upon them, because light undoes the power of darkness in the world. Justice Brandeis once famously said, "Sunlight, sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants." I love that. As we shine light, as we share truth, as we claim and we ask for and demand justice, we shine light; and that disinfects everything around us. Jesus seems to be putting a whole lot on these early disciples. You are salt and you are light. You can't hide yourself, people of God. You've been placed in the middle of the city on a hill. You can't escape being seen. So the question is, what light will you shine into the world?

Jesus says, in fact, that you are a city on a hill, and the city built on a hill cannot be hidden. I was reflecting on that this week. That quote, or idea, a city on a hill—it was used by Kennedy and many others before him. It was repeated most often by President Reagan, was used to describe the hope for America, the promise not yet realized, it became a catchphrase in political terms. But, of course, that phrase is scriptural, and it's not owned by anybody politic. The phrase was perhaps made most famous through a sermon that John Winthrop preached in 1630

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as he made his way to be a part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He preached the sermon there in the bow of the ship. He spoke of a city on the hill. He tried to articulate his hope for the place to which he was going, and this week I couldn't stop thinking about Winthrop's words as I thought about our city as well.

A few weeks ago Tyree Nichols was killed. We wait in expectation for the publication of the video that will detail his killing. Our city is pregnant, unaware of what will come forth from it, and Winthrop's words gave shape to my week this week. I actually think there's more than this city on a hill reference in his sermon that must speak to us this day. He says this, "Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck and to provide for our posterity is to follow the counsel of Micah: to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. For this end we must be knit together in this work as one. We must entertain each other in affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us as God's own people and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways so that we shall see much more of God's wisdom and power and goodness and truth than formerly we have been acquainted with. For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause God to withdraw God's self, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we will be consumed out of the good land and wither as we are going."

Winthrop was making his way to a place he had never been, worried over what would be found there, hopeful of a promise not yet realized. What we know some 400 years later is that the promise that he had hoped for did not include everyone. In fact, many would be trampled under the foot of that promise. We know that that which was built was built on the backs of those who were enslaved. We know that even as he pursued unity in the spirit and the bond of peace, others were excluded. And yet, these words of hope that call upon Micah and later upon the gospel of Matthew, perhaps they are words of preparation for us.

"A city built on a hill cannot be hidden." Neither can the Church of Jesus Christ. Not when salt and light have been declared as to who we are. The church is called to be the light of the world, to illumine the world, to claim and shine light and therefore disinfect everything. And so in the work and the weeks ahead, that is our calling.

To ask for honesty and transparency, to mourn and grieve with our brothers and our sisters is a calling with great difficulty, but it is also a calling pregnant with divine possibility.

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Next week we will have to labor to bring the light of God's truth into our community, and as the Church of Jesus Christ we must advocate for that light to be shown upon systems of power in our midst.

Here's the reality, people of God. What the church says and does in a moment like this cannot be hidden. The way in which the church lives into being the beloved community, shuning light in every shadowy and darkened place, that is the way in which the church will be judged. And each of us.

So my hope for our church, but more so, my hope for each of us is that we would not tire of that gift and that responsibility. That whatever darkness is to be brought upon our city, we ought to shine light there, and courage, and with hope trusting that God is present here. God dwells within each of us, and that God is calling us to a more perfect way of being the body of Christ together.

Friends, here's what I know. The same God that accompanied Winthrop, the same God that sat on a hillside, sits among us now, calling us to grieve with those who grieve, calling us to a more faithful way of moving in the world, calling us to illumine and be light. May we trust in that God's presence and work amongst us, and may we know that God will accomplish the beloved community, and blessing upon blessing will come even with difficult labor.

Let us pray together.

From a hillside we hear of blessings of God.

From this place in the middle of your city of Memphis, we gather to worship you, trusting that indeed your light dwells within each of us.

We gather in hurt and in worry.

We gather with broken hearts and with hopeful faith.

So be light through us in the weeks and the days and weeks ahead.

Oh, God, shine light that all might be disinfected.

Shine light that your comfort might come to those who grieve.

Make your church, make your church a city on the hill.

Let us not shrink or hide from that responsibility, oh God, but encourage us to be what you are calling us to be.

For we ask it in the name of Jesus the Christ.

And all God's people say together. Amen.