

Micah 6:1-8 ~ Matthew 5:1-17
This Is What God's Kingdom Looks Like
 4th Sunday after Epiphany ~ Annual Congregational Meeting ~ January 29, 2023
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Introduction to Second Lesson:

Jesus has gone viral. In just two verses of Matthew from where our reading ended last Sunday. Somehow without the help of TikTok, Twitter, or Instagram, long before the telephone, the telegraph, or tele-anything, Jesus' fame spread fast and furiously. Matthew tells the story like this: "So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan." (Matt. 4:24-25) We are about to hear what he did next.

Jesus was not a wordy man. Throughout the synoptic gospels, he seemed to prefer actions over words, and questions as often as answers. He instructs us to do the same, in his "Sermon on the Mount" as we've come to call Matthew chapters 5 – 7. "Let your word be simply 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no.'" (Matt 5:37) "And when you are praying do not heap up empty phrases." (6:7) Yes, Jesus liked short prayers and streamlined sermons. (And so do you 😊.) Jesus embodied the truth soaked saying attributed to Francis of Assisi, "Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words." So in today's text, where Jesus is choosing words to now interpret his actions that have drawn them to him, we must listen.

One word in particular, Jesus repeats nine times: "Blessed." This word in English, may not bring to mind the fullness of the original Greek word in our gospel, *makarios*. Some English translations use the word "happy" instead of "blessed." Both are partially right. This adjective, *makarios*, refers to the state of being fortunate, happy, or privileged. Since he repeated this word nine times, surely he wanted that crowd on the mountain, and all of us here today, to listen up and to let down our resistance, opening the way for this word to land deep in our spirits.

Sermon:

In the first four weeks of 2023, forty-three mass shootings have already taken place across our beloved country. (I have had to increase this number in my manuscript three times in the three days since I began writing this sermon!) That is more than one a day in January. The shooters range in age from six to seventy-two years old. From Allentown, PA to Durham, NC, to Columbus, Ohio, to Oklahoma City, to Yakima, Washington and two in Monterey Park and Half Moon Bay, California and beyond. Over seventy people have been killed in these shootings, and dozens more injured. Wherever we may be on the political spectrum and whatever we believe about guns, our hearts tell us that this grim record of mass shootings across our land, is *not* what God's kingdom looks like.

You have likely seen the video or heard about the horrifying incident that resulted in the violent death of Tyre Nichols. He was a 29-year-old Black man, who was pulled over for a traffic stop, and then beaten mercilessly by five Memphis police officers, who are also Black. “No one out there that night intended for Tyre Nichols to die,” a lawyer for one of the officers said. And yet three days later he died in the hospital after the Jan. 7 traffic stop. How did this happen? Although we don’t know the whole story, we do know that this is *not* what good policing looks like. And we know that video is not what God’s kingdom looks like, either.

Children of refugee families fleeing for their lives from homelands no longer safe for them, only to be separated from their parents at the border, this is not what God’s kingdom looks like, either. Regardless of how each of us views the immigration problem, we can all agree it is a big problem that is getting worse, not better, at our borders and across the globe. Last year over 100 million people were displaced in our world, over 32.5 million of them are refugees. When I hear statistics like these with numbers in the millions, the picture gets blurry, and my mind goes kind of numb. Until I remember that every one of these displaced people is a beloved child of God, named and claimed, by our Divine Parent, as if they were God’s only child. And the number of God’s beloved displaced people on this earth continues to soar due largely to crime and violence fueled by drug cartels, gangs, increasing inequality, and climate change. God knows and we know this is not what God’s kingdom coming near looks like.

God has told us, “O mortal, what is good.” (Micah 6:8a) And all of this is *not* good. We know that. We feel it in our bones. If all of this news makes you want to take a shower, I have good news for you. We all just took a shower (with our clothes on): a spiritual shower under the faucet of Jesus’ lifegiving truth. A shower that shocked the crowds sitting on that mountain to hear what this healer had to say. And a shower that still jolts us into God’s vision of a radically alternative reality for us today. The Beatitudes of Jesus are exactly the spirit shower we need on this last Sunday in January of 2023. They take the world and turn it on its head: Down is up. Less is more. The silenced shall speak. The edged out brought to the middle. All the underdogs in the world are actually the privileged ones in God’s eyes. Say what?

Imagine the chatter “in the pews” on the mountain that day: “How do we know this upstart is telling the truth?” “Did you hear the story about who is father actually is? Could be a conspiracy theory.” “And besides, what has he been doing all these years?” “Well, he has done some pretty amazing healings lately.” “But how do we know he’s the real deal? Moses is our man.” Like us, they weren’t sure whether to trust this upstart or not. Some came to hear him that day because of the stories about him—but can you trust news from stories that go viral?

Matthew took great care to establish Jesus’ bona fides for his Jewish audience. As Amy-Jill Levine, Jewish New Testament scholar, points out, “I didn’t have to read Matthew 2–7 to know that the rescued baby would take a trip to Egypt, cross water in a life-changing experience, face temptation in the wilderness, ascend a mountain, and deliver comments on the Law—the pattern was already established in the book of Exodus.”¹ As we can see, Matthew, unlike Luke, is intent on identifying Jesus with Moses, the great Hebrew leader who went into the mountain and brought down the law of Yahweh, God’s chosen people. In Matthew’s world

“Moses said” was the equivalent of “God said.” These parallels with Moses were intended to establish the authority of Jesus, to validate him as a true dispenser of divine revelation.”

This was critically important because what Jesus said to them that day on the mountain so counterintuitive and radical. How Jesus proclaimed that they were regarded in God’s kingdom sounded the very opposite from everything the world told them. And so different from how they saw themselves. Or what the world could possibly become. Jesus cast an alternative vision for them and us to see. This is what God’s kingdom looks like: Imagine our world free of tyranny, poverty, loneliness and greed! Imagine us freed from the unholy trinity of ignorance, arrogance and indifference. Imagine the hungry fed, the poor satisfied, the just vindicated. That’s the vision that Jesus gives us in Matthew 5. The beatitudes set the stage for the entire Gospel of Matthew, from his first sermon here in Matthew 5: Blessed are the poor in spirit, to his last sermon, Matthew 25: “I was hungry and you gave me food.” (Matthew 25:35)

So how do get from here to there? How do we move any closer from the month we just lived through, to Jesus’ vision of God’s kingdom? Step one: look at Jesus. God gave us, in addition to one more prophet, a Savior. The Word made flesh. In his actions and his words, he embodied each of the beatitudes so we could see what they look like in real time. Jesus put skin on how God told us to do it through the prophet Micah. **Do justice:** be actively engaged in the redistribution of power in the world. Do what we can to correct systemic inequalities. We do it fueled by the second one: **to love kindness;** and we stay on it, we receive our marching orders day to day by the third one: **walk humbly;** remembering every day, with every step that God is God and we are not.

Jesus says, “Blessed **are** you. Privileged **are** you. Happy **are** you. Then he tops it off with You **are** the salt of the earth. You **are** the light of the world.” He didn’t say, “You will be” one day, if only you get a little bit better. He didn’t say, “you were the light of the world” until you messed things up. Over and over he said in a myriad of ways, through his actions and words: “You **are**. All of you in this whole crowd of people from all over.” How can he say these things? How can they possibly be true? When we take a spiritual shower and let all the layers of how other people see us, how we see ourselves, and even much of what our Christian tradition has layered on top of Jesus’ teaching—when those layers are washed away, we discover again this truth: “There’s nothing you can do to make God love you more. And the opposite is also true: “There’s nothing you can do to make God love you less.” I will say it again, because I pray if you take home one thing from this sermon, it will be this: There’s nothing you can do to make God love you more. And the opposite is also true: there’s nothing you can do to make God love you less.”ⁱⁱⁱ

God’s love is not conditional. Nor is it transactional. You heard how God responded in Micah when Israel responded to God’s charges against God’s chosen with a material offer. God said “no.” God’s love is not a quid pro quo, as much as we may think it to be. While there is you can do to make God love you less there are certainly things we can do, have done that anger God. Why? Because God has put God’s salt and light within each of us. Can you imagine how different this world would be if we truly believed this? Knowing we are loved by God no

matter what, frees us to love our neighbors, to root out systemic injustice. We do this each in our own uniquely God-given ways as individuals, and as the church body we all FPC.

God knows we can do better and do more. If we remember to take that spiritual shower and use the gifts that are there already. Here is the truth. Look around this room, if you are at home look at the other people in the room. If you are worshipping remotely by yourself, look in the mirror: We are what the Kingdom of God looks like. Each, and all of us. The pages of our Annual Report glimmer with nuggets of that beautiful truth for us in 2022 here at FPC.

I will close with the tale of a chassidic rabbi named Rabbi Zusya. Zusya was a timid man, a man who lived a humble life. One day Rabbi Zusya stood before his congregation and he said, "When I die and have to present myself before the celestial tribunal, they will not ask me, 'Zusya why were you not Moses?' because I would say 'Moses was prophet and I am not.' They will not say 'Zusya, why were you not Jeremiah?' for I would say 'Jeremiah was a writer, and I am not.' And they will not say 'Why were you not Rabbi Akiba?' for I would tell them, 'Rabbi Akiba was a great teacher and scholar and I am not.' But then they will say 'Zusya why were you not Zusya?' and to this I will have no answer.

Let us be whom God created and Jesus blessed us to be. A little more nearly each day. Friends you **are** the Light of the world. You **are** what God's kingdom looks like. We **are** called. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, (HarperCollins: New York, NY, 2006), p.3.

ⁱⁱ Natalia Terfa said this in her interview on the *The Hidden World of Modern Faith Communities* podcast, January 25, 2023.