

**“God Is Already at Work. Always.”
Matthew 5:1-12; Micah 6:1-8**

Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ²Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

³“O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you?
Answer me!

⁴For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

⁵O my people, remember now, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.”

⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Introduction

As soon as Jesus had called the first disciples, he went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news, curing every disease and sickness among the people.

His fame spread immediately, and now from all over Syria, the whole region to the north of Galilee, people were bringing him their relatives or friends or neighbors, and he cured them all.

And the crowds following him became enormous—coming from Galilee, from the Decapolis, from Jerusalem, from all over Judea, and from beyond the Jordan River.

These people in the crowds who are following Jesus, looking for healing, are not the Roman occupiers. They're the people whose land is under occupation and whose lives are under surveillance.

They've heard of this astonishing, healing phenomenon, and they have come great distances to experience it, and they've brought with them people who are not in much of a condition to travel.

This isn't a luxury trip that you undertake out of curiosity. You rise up from your sickbed and undertake a grueling journey out of desperation.

If the people in this crowd are able to take the time it would take to find him and follow him, and are desperate enough to do so, they must be the people who have that kind of time available—unemployed, out of answers, scared and facing a very uncertain future.

Maybe Jesus is the last hope of those without financial resources who have at least one sick or suffering child, spouse or parent.

The crowd of people following him includes people who bring with them the layered anxieties of being an occupied people, being excluded from the economy, and being sick themselves or having one or more ill family members to care for, perhaps for whom costly medical attention is required but unavailable.

And I can imagine that in one way or another, every one of them must occasionally entertain the chilling thought: maybe I'm just cursed.

In any given circumstance, a question I have tried to learn to ask is:
Where is God already at work in this situation?

It's kind of another way of saying:

In the midst of pain and difficulty, I believe it is still possible to know that I have an inner joy that is not delusional, and that has nothing to do with whether or not I am feeling particularly happy, or whether or not my body aches, or my heart is crushed, or my soul feels empty.

No matter your circumstances, and no matter the circumstances of the world: Where is God already at work in this situation?

Matthew 5:1-12

¹When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

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

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

⁷“Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

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

The Sermon

Seth Godin recently wrote a brief reflection on “the magic of zooming in,” as a camera lens can zoom in, or in digital photography you can keep zooming in on an image. He was making a point about how, if we only take things at face value, as they appear to be, not only do we miss a lot, but we misunderstand a lot.

He said, “My hunch is that once a medical student has understood what makes us tick, people don’t look quite the same anymore.” Or, “once you understand how the banking system works, a credit card offer feels a bit different.”

He mentioned a composite photograph of 84 million stars, taken by the gigantic ESO telescope in Chile. The composite just looks like one of those nebulae somewhere out in the unfathomable distance; an unimaginably gigantic cloud of phosphorescent light.

But zoom in on that picture, and zoom in again, and again, and again, and the stars begin to differentiate themselves, and you remember that between each one is a practically inconceivable distance of mostly empty space, like the distance between the sun and the nearest star.

And, Seth Godin says, “this vastness is repeated in every system in our lives.”ⁱ

If you look closely, and keep zooming in, and zooming in, until things begin to differentiate themselves, you may be able to discern where God is already at work in every situation, no matter how existentially daunting or traumatically devastating it may be.

So, I have been trying to learn to ask myself this question, “Where is God already at work in this situation?”

And I wonder sometimes if I can really summon up the courage that God has planted within me to zoom in and find the answer.

Because what if I see where God is at work in my situation, and find that that realization asks me to trust God more than I am comfortable trusting anybody other than myself?

What if it asks me to be a peacemaker, when I’m a lot more excited about pressing my advantages and going to war?

What if it asks me to identify with the meek, when I feel like I can get more done and enjoy my privileges more by identifying with the powerful?

What if it finds me in my comfortable sense of having a personal, private friendship with God—a private spirituality that is a getaway for me, and doesn’t involve anybody else—what if it finds me hiding out in that shell, and convinces me in my soul that I need to be doing way, way more to ensure justice for many other people that sometimes I don’t want to have to care about?

Mary Brueggemann mentioned something the other day that pointed me in the direction of some further study, and without retracing all of those steps, I will just say that while the word “righteousness” is an entirely accurate translation in Matthew 5, the Biblical implication has just as much to do with what you and I would call “justice,” to the point that, arguably, a nuanced translation might be:

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *justice*,
 for they will be filled,” and
 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of *justice*,
 for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”ⁱⁱ

And I wonder: when I see how God is already at work, am I going to have to start living more for justice for everyone than I am already comfortable with doing?

But despite whatever cowardice I may hide in from time to time, I have tried to learn to let Jesus ask me that question,

because it reminds me that there is always a real-life application of the description of two holy mysteries found in John 1:5: one, the fact that Jesus was both fully human and fully God, and two, the defining truth of Christianity—that he has been raised from death into new life, and has opened the door for you and me, too.

As John 1:5 puts it, “A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

You can’t paint a smiley face on tragedy or loss or pain or sadness. The God who lost a son on the cross would never ask you to do that.

But in every circumstance we can ask: where is God already at work in this situation, bringing about my salvation, and the salvation and redemption of the world?

You poor in spirit,
 You who mourn,
 You who are meek in a world that worships power,

You who hunger and thirst for justice in a world that says, “Oh, that’s just a bunch of political correctness,”

You who are merciful in a world where ruthlessness plays better in the electorate,

You who are pure in heart, in the face of derision and dismissal by the “cultured despisers of religion,”ⁱⁱⁱ

You who are the peacemakers in a time when people of good will are endlessly baited into conflict and played against each other,

You who are persecuted for the sake of justice in a world that doesn’t want to hear it:

Zoom in, and find your joy, because God has implanted it deep within you; it does not demand that you pretend to be happy, because it does not depend on happiness—it doesn’t even depend on *you*—and it cannot be taken away from you.

God has told you, O mortal, what is good:
And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice,
and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

And so in every circumstance, as you find and follow the one who will bring you through every trial, Jesus has invited you always to consider: Where is God already at work, in your life, and in the world, and in every situation?

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
February 2, 2020

ⁱ Seth Godin, “Seth’s Blog,” January 31, 2020

ⁱⁱ Mary Miller Brueggemann, in a presentation for Montreat Presbyterian Church on January 22, 2020, had done her own research and quoted other scholars and academics. An well-sourced discussion of this phenomenon can be found at https://neoprimitive.wordpress.com/2013/05/24/justice-righteousness-and-the-sermon-on-the-mount/#_ednref1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Friedrich Schleiermacher’s timeless term