



Reading

Matthew 4v23-5v1-3

Jesus was walking throughout all Galilee, preaching in synagogues and healing the sick and demon possessed. And word had spread, so large crowds followed him wherever he went, either to hear him teach or because they hoped he might make them or someone they knew become well. Some came just to take in as pure spectacle. This was Galilee after all: plain, hot, rock-infested, rural Galilee. There was a beautiful city, Tiberius, on the Sea not far away, but in the Scriptures Jesus never went there. He kept mostly to the rocky hillsides and little villages, usually surrounded by the poor, the down and outers; the people society would term “exceedingly broken” or at best “exceedingly plain”. But it was in the midst of this rag-tag, mish-mash of humanity in this rural outpost that Jesus did his healing and preaching.

In all likelihood, Jesus had just finished healing the sick and casting out demons when he went up on the mountainside and began to teach. But Jesus was no ordinary teacher, and this was no ordinary teaching. He began by saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” He continued by pointing out several different groups of people and declaring them blessed or fortunate. What he was saying was ludicrous, wasn’t it? Poverty of any sort, spiritual or otherwise, is not a fortunate state, is it? Mourning is not a fortunate state, is it? How can being persecuted be a blessed thing? The words are shocking and counterintuitive, even offensive.

No one in his or her right mind would want to live this “blessed” life, would they? Yet Jesus was doing something different from what his hearers expected. He wasn’t giving a spiritual to-do list. This wasn’t a self-help teaching about how to achieve blessedness by attaining poverty of spirit. This was an announcement. The healing that had just taken place was nothing less than the rule and reign of God coming to rest upon the least likely of people. In the midst of their poorness of spirit, these people had been blessed; the kingdom of God had come upon them. In other words, fortunate are racists because the rule and reign of God can come upon even them. Fortunate are addicts because the rule and reign of God is only a breath away. Fortunate are those who’ve blown it. Blessed are the nobodies. Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount with blessing, and there’s

nothing anybody can do to earn what he’s describing. God is blessing people for no reason other than the fact that blessing is what God does, and everybody, everywhere is fair game.

Questions

Jesus’ teachings consistently disrupted the commonly held belief that blessedness was something a person could “achieve” and ultimately deserve [Read Luke 15v11-32 and Matthew 20v1-16]. How do you feel about the idea that God doesn’t give people what they deserve? How might that actually be a blessing?

Read Exodus 20v1-17. What similarities do you see between Moses and Jesus in these two stories? What do they do that is similar? Where do they both go? What connection do you see between the Ten Commandments and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount? Notice how the Ten Commandments also begin with an announcement of what God had already done.

Practice

Spend some time this week [in a conversation or by jotting notes down on this paper] reflecting on what God has already done. In what ways has the rule and reign of God come upon you in the midst of your own brokenness? Be deliberate this week to point out [announce] the ways in which you see God present and at work in the lives of those around you.

Prayer

To help focus your attention on the reckless availability of God’s blessing, pray this prayer often during the week.

The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance on you, and give you peace. So they shall invoke my name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them.*

*Numbers 6v22-27

sanctuary