

## **“Praxis”**

### **Scripture**

### **Matthew 7:7-14** (*The Message*)

<sup>7</sup> "Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. <sup>8</sup> This isn't a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in. <sup>9</sup> If your child asks for bread, do you trick him with sawdust? <sup>10</sup> If he asks for fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? <sup>11</sup> As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing. You're at least decent to your own children. So don't you think the God who conceived you in love will be even better?

<sup>12</sup> "Here is a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them. Add up God's Law and Prophets and this is what you get. <sup>13</sup> "Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. <sup>14</sup> The way to life - to God! - is vigorous and requires total attention.

### **Matthew 5:10** (*The Message*)

<sup>6</sup> "You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom."

### **Scripture**

### **Matthew 7:7-14** (*NRSV*)

<sup>7</sup> "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>8</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>9</sup> Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? <sup>10</sup> Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? <sup>11</sup> If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

<sup>12</sup> "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. <sup>13</sup> "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. <sup>14</sup> For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

### **Matthew 5:10** (*NRSV*)

<sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

If you look closely at Jesus' eight (or is it nine) blessings or beatitudes at the beginning of his famous Sermon on the Mount you will notice that the first and the last blessings have two things uniquely in common. First of all, both end

with the same promise, a blessing of the heavenly kingdom of heaven. Comfort, the earth as an inheritance, being filled, mercy, a vision of God and being children of God are the promises given in the intervening beatitudes. But the first and the last end with theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The second shared similarity is that this promise of the kingdom is stated in the present tense. Those who mourn, who are meek, merciful, and so on, have a future promise given to them. They *will* be . . . comforted, they *will* inherit the earth, receive mercy. But if you are poor in spirit, or if you are persecuted, the promise has already arrived. The kingdom of heaven is yours *now, in the present*.

That sounds like quite a deal, to have part in the kingdom of heaven immediately and without delay. Songs are written of such things, to be sure – albeit while dancing cheek to cheek. And of course, the odd thing is that when Jesus talks about the presence of the heavenly kingdom, it is in concert with being blessed because of persecution.

Perhaps this is one more difference between this last of the Beatitudes and the others in front of it. The others speak of general, human conditions as the setting for God’s unique blessings. But when we start to speak of persecution we’ve gone from common and everyday situations to the condition associated with following Jesus.

I thought about that a bit this week. The sermon title started out as “Happily Coming in Second,” which, when I first wrote it a couple of months ago was to be about graciously letting someone else win. Playing basketball in the driveway was one of the things I especially loved when my two boys were of an age. They’d invite their friends over and we’d play to 15. I’d give them 12 to start and play five of them at a time. I’d run up 10 points as quickly as possible. If they made a basket, they did it on their own merit. But I wanted to make it close so that they would almost gang tackle me as a dribbled up to make my shots. But when I was being my best self, I would almost catch them, maybe even get them to sudden death, and then let them make the final shot. I would happily come in second. Good title, I thought. But then we had the election this week and I saw that my meaning could well get misconstrued. Yet more importantly, I saw that the beatitude regarding persecution is really about what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus was persecuted. He was crucified. And he invited his followers to live a cruciform life, telling them that in their acts of laying themselves down like that – through acts of love, perhaps – they would know the eternal life of God. So, while the earlier blessings pertain to the inevitable experiences of life like impoverishment of spirit, mourning, finding oneself in situations of meekness, passionately wanting justice, and so on, this final Beatitude has a specificity about it that shouldn’t be dissolved into the everyday. It asks us to be followers of the Jesus who endured the cross as his way of bringing the kingdom of heaven into our present world on earth.

The question then seems to be: “how?” How does that happen? How does being experiencing persecution bring with it the experience of God’s presence?

Daniel Patte writes of how this passage invites us into the whole Sermon on the Mount where action and reflection go together like an oscillating fan – back and forth, back and forth, the two connected with each other and building because of the movement between. Jesus’ sermon in Matthew 5 though 7 invites

us to go beyond mere adherence to the Jewish law towards an overabundant righteousness. Where the law said, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” Jesus bids us as his followers to “turn the other cheek,” “to walk an extra mile” even with an enemy who we are to love and pray for. In talking about such things, Jesus is sketching out the kind of life that he will lead which will eventually take him to his cross. But kingdom of heaven isn’t just on the other side of that cross. It is found on the road to that God-trusting end.

Patte points out, however, that the sermon isn’t all action and no script. “The fundamental precondition for overabundant righteousness is taking notice,” he says, “seeing what is wrong in oneself, or more generally, perceiving correctly” where good might be found in the other or in the situation, and with a holy enthusiasm to tease out that heavenly vision with that faith that discipleship invites.

In getting ready for today’s presentation of the children’s ministries in Sunday School, Bonnie was telling me the philosophy embedded in our church’s *Godly Play* program, what the little ones go to following the children’s sermon. There, they hear in depth the Bible story, attending to the delight of the storytelling and as the kids are able, to open themselves to the surprising possibilities in the things we hear from Jesus and the Bible. What is not supposed to happen is that the kids get a lecture on how to be good, how to be good little boys and girls, doing what the older ones tell them. “When that day comes when they will find themselves in a fearful situation or confronting some wrong, *Godly Play* doesn’t want them to merely acquiesce. The purpose of the Bible learning time is so that they will be able through their reflection, draw upon courage and the delight that they have in God so that they can act on what is heavenly and full of good purpose, even in the situation of persecution.

Action and reflection oscillating back and forth is the means by which one learns the blessing of the heavenly kingdom’s presence even and including experiences of persecution. It invites us to the golden rule of “loving our neighbor as ourselves.” It sees in our own delight in giving good gifts to our children a way to imagine how God’s blessing works in the daily opportunities of mixing with other people. It invites us into a watchfulness and discipline about how taxing such things can be, so we are invited to enter through a narrow gate, not only gaining access to the heavenly kingdom, but then to walk on the narrow path that continues that attentiveness to God’s ways which we can know and experience in living out the stories and teachings which we get from Jesus. The word for this action/reflection back and forth is praxis. It’s what this last beatitude points us to a practice of our faith that partners with reflection about how this all connects with God’s ways.

Today in our bulletins, we have a little questionnaire. It asks about where you might be stewards of something other than financial gifts that support our church’s ministry and mission. Stewardship asks us to give of our time, talents and treasures. The questionnaire asks you to consider where you might find a place of praxis as you respond to Jesus’ naming of the blessing of following him. I’m going to end this sermon here and give you all a brief time to respond by filling out the questionnaire. We are updating our computer so that we can better

invite you to participate in the heavenly kingdom which we are to experience. We hope this helps.