

Beginner's Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven
Matthew 5:1-16
January 15, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church
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This is the weekend that we celebrate the life and servant leadership of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., so it is fitting to begin with a saying from him: "Take the first step in faith," he said. "You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step." King was talking about building the Beloved Community, the world where justice prevails and the meek get to inherit the earth at last. If one step ahead is as far as you can see, that's enough. Take that step. The next step will be clear when you need to take it. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.

Today's scripture, from the Sermon on the Mount, is the same kind of instruction. Jesus sees the crowds coming toward him, and instead of going out to meet them, he takes just his disciples up the mountain and talks just to them.

At this point in Matthew's gospel, we only know of four disciples who have been called: Simon and Andrew, James and John. They have left their homes and jobs to follow Jesus, but we haven't heard much yet about what following Jesus means. The whole Sermon on the Mount – three chapters of this gospel, not just the Beatitudes – are the beginning of Jesus' teaching them about what discipleship requires. This is a sort of beginner's guide to the Kingdom of Heaven, a glimpse of the Beloved Community and the first steps for getting there. The disciples don't have to see the whole staircase at this point; they just need to know where to start. What is the first step? So, Jesus teaches them:

Blessed are those who depend on God alone, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for God will comfort them.

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

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

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

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

Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you if people revile you for my sake, for your reward will be great in heaven.

That's it? Those are the first steps? Just the FIRST steps in welcoming the Kingdom of Heaven to earth? The FIRST steps in building the Beloved Community? I don't know how those first four disciples felt, but those sound to me like a challenge for someone well along the path – badges for an Eagle Scout, not for a Tiger Cub.

I mean, I can imagine how to be a peacemaker. I don't always find it easy to do, but I can imagine what that might require of me. And I always hunger and thirst for justice. But I don't know anyone who is truly

pure in heart, least of all myself. And, as much as I want justice in this world, I can't honestly say I want to be persecuted for its sake. I could practice diligently all my life, praying fervently for all of these virtues, or even one of them, and still find them to be beautiful, challenging aspirations on the last day of my life. So, I wonder if Simon and Andrew and James and John heard Jesus say these things and wondered if it was too late to go back to being fishermen, with nothing more to worry about than whether their nets were mended properly.

In case the disciples were feeling discouraged at this point, however, Jesus tells them what he sees in them – not merely capable fishermen, but wondrous spiritual creatures, with unlimited potential, people fully capable of building the Beloved Community right now, on earth, in this life. “Live this way,” Jesus says. “It’s the first step. This where the Kingdom of Heaven begins. Right here. And I know you can do this because I know who you are in your soul. You are the salt of the earth. You, Andrew, and you, James, you give the world its flavor. You, Simon, are the light of the world. You, too, John. Let your light shine!”

Jesus saw possibilities in his disciples that they surely could not see in themselves. What must it have felt like, to have Jesus look you right in the eye and say, “You – you! – are the light of the world. The world needs your light. Let it shine!”

God has the very same confidence in each of us. God sees what we are capable of, and it is always more than we think we can do. Because God gives us the gifts we need to take that first step, and the next one, and the one after that.

We saw last week that the Holy Spirit offers different gifts to each of us, not for our own benefit, but for the building up of the whole. One step at a time, God gives us the gifts we need to reach the top stair, and together we build the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of Heaven, right here in Center Harbor, right now. We may not be able to see the whole path ahead of us, but we can take the first step.

You are the salt of the earth. This church is the central flavor of our community, the seasoning that brings out all the other flavors in the pot. Center Harbor would not be the same, it would taste flat, if we were not here. Be salt.

You are the light of the world. The world needs your light. It needs you to shine. Be light. Shine for all the world to see.

So here is the beginner’s guide to the Kingdom of Heaven. Be salt. Be light. The rest of the steps will take care of themselves. You are salt. Be salt. And you are light. Be the light.

Amen