

**Rejoice sermon 2/16/20**  
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If you've worshiped in the Rejoice service for either of the past two Sundays, you will remember that we are in the third consecutive week of Gospel texts from the portion of Matthew's gospel that we call the Sermon on the Mount. Two weeks ago, we heard the Beatitudes – blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Last week, we heard Jesus's teachings about salt and light – you are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. And this week we hear some of the next portion of the Sermon on the Mount. I can imagine Jesus and his followers gathered around a patch of grass on the side of this mountain, sitting and standing around and watching this itinerant teacher do his thing. It feels like he's doing what I've seen a lot of great teachers and speakers do – they start off with something beautiful and profound, something that means an awful lot and which may even be immensely challenging, but which at first hearing might not feel too hard to take in. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." The hearers of these Beatitudes may not hear themselves implicated in the words Jesus has said thus far. But then we get the salt and light – with this, the hearers are addressed, are explicitly implicated. "*You* are the salt of the earth; *You* are the light of the world." The intensity is ramping up; I imagine the people gathered around the teacher squirming, maybe averting their eyes. "Is he talking to *us*?"

And then Jesus comes to the portion of his teaching that is today's Gospel reading. The squirming crowd is no longer wondering; Jesus is definitely talking to them. And he says this-Matthew 5, verses 17 through 20 and 27 through 37. Listen for what the Word is saying to us this day.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter of the law, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

You have heard that it was said, 'You should not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by earth, for it is God's footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No;' anything more than this comes from the evil one."

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

As they listen to portion of the Sermon on the Mount, I imagine the crowd has to quit squirming and averting their eyes and whispering. I imagine they're sitting still now, realizing that this teacher actually has some really hard things to say specifically to them. This teacher is not messing around; he's not delivering platitudes or quippy little instructions for living a moral life. He has come with something to say about tradition and law and grace and most of all, the kingdom of heaven; the world as God knows it. I imagine that the crowd of disciples gathered on the mountainside are now coming to know what we already know: that this Jesus is no ordinary teacher. He is the God-made-flesh, the teacher and preacher with the kind of authority that only comes from God, and in this part of the Sermon on the Mount, we hear it. Jesus says he has not come to get rid of the law that governs these people's lives; he has come to *fulfill* it. He has come to say, "You might think you know about righteousness and justice, but listen to what I'm about to tell you; I'll show you real righteousness and justice. I'll show you the world as God knows it; I'll show you the kingdom of heaven." And that's exactly what he does.

Jesus shows the disciples that in the world as God knows it, in the kingdom of heaven, there is no objectification of the other; there is no treating people like objects. In the kingdom of heaven, you may as well get rid of an eyeball or a hand if you're going to so much as *look* at another person in a way that denies them their full dignity as a child of God. In the kingdom of heaven, that kind of behavior simply is not tolerated; it cannot exist. Because in the world as God knows it, in the world that Jesus has come to proclaim, people's bodies are treated with dignity and love.

He also tells the disciples that in the world as God knows it, there are no broken unions, no shattered bonds. In the kingdom of heaven, divorce and adultery are indistinguishable; brokenness and lost trust and deep relational wounds reveal a kind of brokenness that just does not exist there. Because in the world as God knows it, in the world Jesus has come to proclaim, relationships are grounded in wholeness and mutuality and care for the other.

He also tells the disciples that in the kingdom of heaven, there is no oath-taking or swearing. In the world as God knows it, no one swears in the name of anyone earthly or divine; no one takes an oath in promise of an imagined future. Because in the kingdom of heaven, in the world Jesus has come to proclaim, there is no pretending to control the future. People know and *trust* that all of life belongs to God, that the future rests solely in God's hands.

Jesus is giving the people crowded onto that Galilean mountainside a tiny taste of the world he has come to proclaim. These glimpses into the kingdom of heaven are a foretaste of the world to come: the world where tears are wiped away, where death is no more, where all the former things have passed away. This world where objectification and broken promises and empty oaths no longer exist is the world that Jesus proclaims throughout his ministry when he says “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” This is the kingdom of heaven that is like a mustard seed growing from something tiny to something great; like yeast that becomes leavened; like treasure hidden in a field, a pearl of great price, a net full of fish. In the world as God knows it, all are fed by the Bread of Life and all are made glad by the fruit of the Vine. This is like nothing the world has ever known.

Jesus says to the people listening to him, “You’ve heard it said... But I say to you...” You think you know what righteousness and justice look like and feel like, but you don’t even know the half of it. I say to you, the kingdom of heaven looks and feels like the fulfillment of all the righteousness and justice you’ve known, the fulfillment of all the glimpses and foretastes of the kingdom that you’ve experienced here. I imagine the Galilean crowd’s heads are spinning now. Who *is* this man with the kind of authority to say these things, and what exactly is he saying? I imagine this was a wild day in Galilee.

But we – you and I – don’t live in Galilee in the first century. We weren’t there on the side of that mountain. We live in the time between his life among those disciples and his coming again in glory. This means we dwell in a time where we’ve heard of a world turned upside down, but it’s not turned on its head yet. We’ve heard of the kingdom of heaven, we’ve what it looks and smells and tastes like, but we haven’t seen or smelled or tasted it all yet. We live in the in-between times, knowing Jesus through the pages of Scripture, in sacrament and prayer and song; but the world does not yet exist as God knows it. We know this because things like lust and broken promises and empty oaths are part of the world we live in. Our communities, families, and inner lives are marked by the presence of sin and death. We know deeply what the apostle Paul means when he says in Romans 7, “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I do.” This is not the kingdom of heaven.

But in these words from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus beckons his disciples across the ages to live as if the kingdom were already among us. These words about righteousness invite us to think about the law, the rules that govern our sense of moral and religious and social righteousness, a bit differently. Jesus invites us to stop thinking about these things as necessary restrictions on sin and evil in the world, but rather to think of them as parts of an expansive vision for the kingdom of God, in which justice, reconciliation, and abundance are simply the norm. The passage we’ve zeroed in on today may seem like it’s full of harsh words and narrow constraints on our living, but it’s really full of words about what God’s world looks like in its truest form.

Jesus calls us beyond our own righteousness. With this repeated formula of “You’ve heard it said... but I say to you...,” he invites us to think about what we’ve heard about justice and what Jesus has to say about it. This is not easy work, but it is good and holy work.

It might look like taking a long hard look at your company’s business practices and asking yourself if they reflect what life looks like in the kingdom of heaven. We may have ethics guidelines in the workplace, but do they reflect a broader ethic that Jesus embodies, where

people are treated with dignity and all are recognized as beloved children of God? If not, we get to start those conversations – this is part of what it means to be a Christian. In the world as God knows it, all of life is under Christ's rule.

Jesus also calls us beyond our own righteousness within the sphere of our own personal lives. We might imagine Jesus saying, "You've heard it said that you should come to worship pretty regularly and raise your kids in Sunday School & youth group...but I say to you, the Christian life is about more than showing up. It's about letting what you do here shape the way you live your life." Our sense of righteousness may guide us to show up – and showing up is good! – but the call of discipleship goes far beyond showing up. Again, in the world as God knows it, all of life is under Christ's rule.

Let's return to our bewildered crowd on the Galilean mountainside. We are gathered together with those followers, called beyond our own sense of what's right and just, into a new way of seeing the world. And though we have heard more of God's story than those first disciples, we are right there with them in wondering how exactly we are to live within this new upside-down world of the kingdom of heaven. The life of Christian discipleship continues on through the ages as we encourage one another in community to probe our preconceived notions of what the world should be. And so we keep showing up here for worship, study, and service, because it is through these basic Christian acts that we come to know the world as God knows it. We do this knowing the world has already been redeemed for all eternity by the God-made-flesh who came to dwell among us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.