

Matthew 5: 3-11

The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best known part of the teaching of Jesus. In this sermon we find the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, the teaching on loving one's enemy and not judging others. We learn the Golden Rule, we hear about both the narrow and wide gates, and we hear the story of the wise and foolish builders. A lot of material!! And over the next couple of weeks, we as a congregation will be reflecting on bits and pieces of this sermon.

As we think about this sermon, one of the things that we should remember is that Jesus is talking here to his disciples. He is not talking to unbelievers. Jesus is talking to his followers. Jesus is telling his disciples and he is telling us even today – how our lives should look like. In these Beatitudes, Jesus is showing the pattern of the Christian life. Most of us know about the fruits of the Spirit, which Paul writes about: of how as Christians we have joy, of how as Christians we are gentle, loving, patient, good, faithful; as Christians we are peaceful and we exercise self-control. The same way, using the Beatitudes, Jesus describes the characteristics of God's people.

In the Beatitudes – verses 3 through 11 – Jesus is not talking about eight separate and distinct groups of disciples: some of whom are meek while others are merciful, and yet others are called upon to endure persecution. No! They are the eight qualities of the same group of people. All Christians are called to be meek and merciful. We are all to be poor in spirit and pure in heart. We are all called to mourn and to be hungry. We are called to be peacemakers and to be persecuted.

Following Jesus sets us apart from the world. Christians do not take their cue in life from the people around them. Further into his sermon, Jesus tells us not to be like others. We are to take our cue from him. As Christians, we are called to be different. For Jesus reminds us that even the unbelievers greet each other; love one another – but as Christians, we are to love our enemies. Jesus reminds us that unbelievers often spend most of their efforts gathering up earthly treasures, but as Christians we are to first seek God and his righteousness. Jesus reminds us that even unbelievers pray- using all kinds of empty phrases. But Christians pray with a humble heart, recognizing their own need for repentance. Christians pray with humble hearts.

In his sermon, Jesus calls his disciples, calls us to be different because he wants us to be a holy people. Jesus wants us to be lights in a dark world. Jesus wants us to be like him – the Light of the world. Just as Jesus reflected God in how he lived his life here on earth, so we as his followers strive, to reflect him.

When I was thinking about these eight beatitudes or characteristics, the one that kept coming back to me was “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.” It was almost like it was the first time I took note of the word peacemakers as opposed to peacekeeper.

I know all about peacekeepers. At different stages in my life, I have tried to be a peacekeeper. Peacekeepers want quiet at all costs. They do not take any initiatives to make peace. They are not interested in settling disagreements or disputes. Peacekeepers do not necessarily worry about what is right or wrong; they do not necessarily concern themselves about what is fair. They just don't want conflict. They want their lives to be

hassle free. They don't want any kind of struggle. All they want is order – they just want their lives to work in the best way possible.

Over the years, I have talked to many battered women. They stayed with their husbands so that their children would live normal lives. They wanted their kids to have fathers and so they did their best to keep the peace. Yet when their bodies could no longer absorb the beatings, or when their husbands began beating their children, these women would realize that they could not be the peacekeepers they wanted to be.

Jesus does not call us to be peacekeepers. Jesus does not call us to give in to all kinds of unfair demands, or subject ourselves to cruel treatment. Jesus does not call us to appease everybody and everything. Jesus himself didn't do that. Rather, Jesus calls us to be peacemakers. We are to make peace. God calls us to seek out what is right; what is just and then, to act accordingly. And the truth be known, making peace takes effort, it is hard work. Peacemaking often comes at a cost.

Up until 1954, schools in the U.S. were segregated. White children went together to one school, and black children went together to another. Needless to say, the white schools were bigger and better. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was unconstitutional. The court ordered the schools to integrate. But most schools were opposed to this.

When Ruby Bridges was ready to start kindergarten, she went to a segregated black school quite a way from her home. She loved her school; she loved her teacher. She had lots of friends. Towards the end of her kindergarten year, Ruby with all the other children completed a test. The results of this test: changed the course of Ruby's life. The test that these black children took, was to determine if any of them were smart enough to even go to a white school. Well, Ruby passed with flying colors! And the federal court in New Orleans ordered the closest school to Ruby's home, to admit her into grade one in September. The federal court ruled that Ruby had the right to go to the closest school to her home!

This was a very hard time for Ruby's parents. Ruby's father did not want any part of school integration. He was a gentle man, and he worried about what could happen to his family. He had fought in the Korean War, and he knew what it meant to be a black person among whites. Ruby's mother, however, argued that Ruby should get the best education possible – it would be worth the risk.

All through the summer and early fall, the schools fought the federal court. But in the end, the judge ruled that on Monday, November 14th, integration would proceed. So on the 14th, four U.S. federal marshals, carrying guns, came to drive Ruby and her mother to school. As they approached the school, there were barricades and people everywhere. People were holding signs, people were shouting insults and death threats. When Ruby and her mother got out of the car, they were surrounded by the federal marshals.

Ruby's first day of school was spent waiting outside the principal's office. The principal didn't have time for Ruby – she was busy dealing with all the parents who were taking their children out of school. The next day Ruby went to class, but she was the only one in it. The third day, Ruby's mom tells Ruby that she needs to go back to work, so Ruby will have to go to school by herself. Day after day, Ruby arrives at school surrounded by the federal marshals – while people shout at her, and some even spit on her. Yet Ruby remains determined – despite the fact that there are consequences for her and her family in their neighborhood as well. Ruby's dad loses his job; they are asked

not to shop at the local store, and Ruby's best friend's parents forbid her to play with her anymore. Although they kind of want to support Ruby, they don't want any trouble. They don't want to get involved.

One night, Ruby can't sleep – she comes to her parents' bedroom and tells her mom that she is afraid. Her mom asks Ruby if she has talked to God about this. Ruby slowly shakes her head, no. Her mom gives her a kiss, and then tells her to go pray. Ruby, does this – on her knees beside her bed, and tears streaming down her face.

As Ruby would arrive at school each day, accompanied by the federal marshals, her teacher would always be looking out her window for her. One day, to the teacher's amazement, she saw Ruby stop walking – right in front of the mob of angry, screaming people. This little six year-old girl stood still, facing all those people. She seemed to be talking to them. The crowd seemed ready to kill her. The federal marshals were frightened and tried to hurry Ruby into the school. But Ruby didn't move. When she went into the classroom, her teacher asked her what happened: what had she said to the people. Ruby denied saying anything. But the teacher insisted that she saw Ruby talking to them. Then Ruby said: "I wasn't talking, I was praying. I was praying for them." Apparently every morning and every afternoon before and after school, Ruby prayed for the people who hated her. And this particular morning, she had forgotten to pray until she was already in the middle of the angry mob.

Each day before and after school, Ruby would pray this prayer:

Please, God, try to forgive those people.
Because even if they say those bad things.
They don't know what they're doing.
So you could forgive them,
Just like you did those folks a long time ago
When they said terrible things about you.

Like Ruby, I believe that if we want to be peacemakers, we need to look at the life of Jesus. As God's Son, he came down to earth because that is what God wanted for him to do. Jesus spent his life with people – teaching them about God's grace; healing the sick and feeding the hungry. Jesus was a friend to the outcasts: the nobodies. Jesus went out of his way to be with people who were needy. He even went so far as to give up his life. He died so that all people might receive healing – reconciliation - peace with God. For true peace can only come when we are in tune with God. True peace can only come when we prayerfully ask for God's Spirit to come into our lives.

In Acts 2, we find a picture of peacemakers. After the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we find the believers – people of all kinds of different nationalities – reaching out to one another. We read that the believers devoted themselves to the apostles; teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continue to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

Peacemaking is not about changing others. In fact it is about connecting with God: reading Scripture, prayer, meeting with other Christian believers, and reaching out to others. Peacemaking is about sharing the story of God's grace with others. Peacemaking

is about meeting in small groups – where we can encourage each other and pray with each other. It is about visiting the sick, the elderly, especially those who can no longer get out the way they used to. It's about going to nursing homes. Peacemaking is about when you are doing your groceries, and remembering to buy some canned food for the poor. Peacemaking can take place right after church, when you are in the fellowship hall, and you go and talk to people who are standing all by themselves, perhaps even looking somewhat lost. Sometimes peacemaking simply means serving coffee after church. I believe that peacemaking especially in Southern California means interacting with people from different cultures. Peacemaking is about praying for others, even for your enemies. For Ruby, peacemaking was going to a school whose supporting community had to learn about integration. What I am trying to say is: peacemaking is done in all kinds of ways.

Peacemaking is taking initiative – not waiting for someone to ask you to do something. Peacemaking means to knowing yourself, the gifts you have to offer and then to offer them wherever you see the need. Peacemaking also is not restricted to age – Ruby was only six years old – and even when you are older, you can always pray and offer encouraging words to those around you.

And just as Jesus promises: when you do the work of peacemaking, you will experience God's blessing, God will give you his peace – and others will recognize you as a child of God.