



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Seek Ye First...”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Micah 6: 1-8; Matthew 7: 7-11

July 13, 2025

As we enter into week three of our series, we catch one of the Beatitudes that is, perhaps, not quite as clear-cut, at least on the surface, as are some others. Last week we explored Matthew 5:4, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,” and the fundamental implications of that Beatitude are pretty clear. Looking at it through the lens of the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector allowed for a broadened perspective on what it means to mourn and what that blessing might be, but the framework of that particular Beatitude is pretty evident. I’m not sure that the same is true for this week’s verse.

Jesus goes on, in verse 5 of Matthew 5, saying, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” I’m not sure we have quite as much clarity on what Jesus is talking about there. There’s a lot of room for figurative interpretation that phrase, and it can take us a lot of directions. So, I want to work backwards and start with the second half of that promise. I think that our minds can go a lot of places when we start talking about ‘inheriting the earth.’ That figurative mindset starts imagining all manners of wealth and privilege that one might draw from this concept of inheriting the earth. There’s something enticing about putting that fiscal and worldly framework on this passage that allows us to picture that orphaned child or struggling widow cowering in the corner of the crowd hearing that she will know such earthly privileges in her terrestrial life.

It's worth noting, however, that what we are talking about is word that literally means earth. Not ‘The Earth,’ but ‘earth.’ Jesus isn’t talking, here, about people inheriting the globe, he’s talking about people inheriting soil... land... dirt. And, that’s imperative in any attempt to parse this Beatitude. When we hear Jesus proclaim that the meek will inherit the earth, our minds start picturing the globe – the world – and all of the figurative interpretations that go with that. What Jesus was talking about here, however, is earth – and that had a very specific meaning to these people. Remember, despite our retrospective look at things – Jesus wasn’t talking to a group of Christians. There was no such thing as a ‘Christian’ at this point in time. Jesus was talking, more than to any other group at this point in his ministry, to people of the Jewish faith. These were practicing, dedicated, faithful Jews who had differing perspectives on who this Jesus was, but who all came from the same groundwork of faith that resided in the promise to Abraham that had been made centuries before.

Going all the way back to the beginning, Genesis 12 tells us that, “the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’” (Gen 12: 1-3). Then, a few verses later as Abram passes through the land of the Canaanites, Genesis tells us that, “The Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’” (Gen 12:7)

The journey of Abraham... the march of the Israelites through the wilderness... many of the battles that we see depicted in the Old Testament... even some aspects of the tension that exists in the Middle East today... all stem from that promise that God was going to make Abraham’s descendants (the Israelites) a great nation who would know the land of Canaan – a land flowing with milk and honey – as their home. That was the Jewish story. In many ways, the Messiah was understood within first century Judaism to be the one who would restore that promise. That was the perspective of the Jewish audience to which Jesus was speaking that day. So, when Jesus says that the meek will inherit the earth, they didn’t hear ‘The Earth,’ nor did they hear some figurative interpretation of worldly blessings. To inherit the earth (dirt... soil... land...), for them, was to see that covenant fulfilled – to know the unveiling of God’s promises. To inherit the earth, for those who were listening that day, was to see the realization of the commitment God had made to Abram some 1,500 to 2,000 years before. That’s the promise that they heard in these words.

Now, who are the ‘meek?’ This is a tougher question, as I think our minds tend to spin in different directions. Meek means a lot of things to a lot of people – and it often has a pretty negative connotation to it. I was interested in what synonyms would come up for meek, so I did a quick Google search, and sure enough I saw words like un-ambitious, timid, frightened, spineless, spiritless, wimpish and weak. One phrase that popped up as a synonym actually read ‘like a lamb to the slaughter.’ I think these are the pretty common sensibility when we hear that word. Meek, frankly, is not something we tend to use very often in a positive way. There is a generally pejorative implication anytime we describe anyone as meek.

The irony, however, is that all of those synonyms for meek that I just shared are the ones that were buried well down on the list of those that Google noted. There’s a whole other side to that word that I think we far too often overlook. It’s worth noting that the first synonyms to pop up when I did that Google search were words such as patient, forbearing, gentle, humble and mild. And, as much as our minds tend to go the other way – that’s what Jesus is talking about in this Beatitude. The word being translated here is a Greek word that in fact means gentle, mild, and humble. Jesus isn’t talking about some wimp trembling in the corner – or frankly even about some widow or orphan that doesn’t have the means to stand up for themselves. Jesus is talking about the person who is humble, mild, and gentle of heart.

Consider, if you will, that passage that we shared from Micah.

“With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” 8 He has told you, O mortal, what

is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6: 6-8)

Micah's circumstance is critical, here, as he was something of the working man's prophet. Micah saw a great threat to his people at the hands of the growing Assyrian Empire, and he believed that the extravagance and wayward attentions of the people of Israel were at fault. The pending doom, in Micah's eyes, was God's retribution for the failures of his people. That's what Micah is talking about here. In a world of excess and extravagance – a world in which people of means are seeking to buy their way out of trouble through pricey sacrifices – Micah reminds them of the heart of what God wants from God's people. *He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)* Or, if I can say it another way, all God wants from any of us is to care for others and walk with God! Does that sound familiar? 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.' There's a pretty consistent message in all of this!

The parable that framed some of my reflections this week – as we continue to use parables as a lens into the Beatitudes – is one that is familiar, but one I'm not sure we always include as part of that parable tradition of Jesus. Jesus starts the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes but then, a bit later, still in that same discourse in Matthew, he offers a parable, in slightly different form than others we've seen, starting in verse 7 of chapter 7.

"Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 9 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for bread, would give a stone? 10 Or if the child asked for a fish, would give a snake? 11 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! (Matthew 7: 7-11)

Now, what was intriguing to me about this parable in the context of our Beatitude is the fundamental question of where our focus lies. We live in an era of unparalleled diversion and distraction. My kids have notifications on their phones for various apps that can, at times, lead to hundreds of pop-ups on their screens in a single hour. I can stream YouTube videos and play Tetris on the center console computer of my car (not while I'm driving, but still...). There is an ever-growing cadre of multimillionaires in this world whose entire fortune is generated by their capacity to get people to pay attention to them – to simply look in their direction, click on their video or 'like' their post. When our entire family is together in an evening watching television (something that doesn't happen very often anymore, but when it does...), it is not unheard of that our family of 5 will have more than 10 screens actively engaged in that room. And it's not just the computers and phones. Billboards, marquees, yard-signs, banners... our hours and days are filled with a constant chorus of voices trying to grab our attention, influence our thinking, steer our decisions, and in a thousand other ways try to get us to embrace their particular view, product, process, theory, or other widget that will guide us that ambiguous Utopian reality that exists in the back of our minds.

Meanwhile, what does our parable say? Ask God! Seek God! Reach out to God! What does Micah say? Care for others and walk with God! What does Jesus say in the Great

Commandment? ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.’ There’s a pretty consistent message in all of this!

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.’ (Matthew 5:5) I think our minds can go a lot places with that one. I think we hear the word earth and we think about ‘the Earth’ and all of the figurative interpretation that comes with it. I think we hear meek, and we think about all of those pejorative connotations that we know in that word. I think the person who heard Jesus speak those words that day, however, heard the same message they’d heard so many times, in so many ways, before. Inheriting the earth – to a first-century Jew schooled in that centuries-old covenant with Abraham – means finding the fulfillment of God’s promises. The meek are the mild and humble in heart who are focused first and foremost on God in their lives. I think the first-century Jew in that crowd heard Jesus saying that the person who seeks God in humility above all else is the one who will find the fulfillment of God’s ultimate promises in their lives.

Micah, our parable, the Great Commandment, the third Beatitude – I genuinely think they are all saying the same thing. ‘Seek first and foremost the presence and righteousness of God, and doing so God will be found.’