

## Getting Serious about Discipleship

Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

“Honored the poor in spirit...those who mourn...the meek...those who hunger and thirst for righteousness....Honored the merciful...the pure in heart...the peacemakers...those who are persecuted for righteousness sake....Honored are you when people revile you....”

What a week it has been! You wake up in the morning and you have no idea what utterly unimaginable thing is going to happen today. You lie down to sleep at night and your mind still keeps turning over and over the different future unfolding before you. Things are coming at you so quickly, you can barely process them. The ground beneath you is shifting so radically, you can hardly keep your balance. This time last week, you already had been fishing for hours and you were still in the boat, mending nets with your father. You were talking together about your day in the market, the children’s need for discipline, village politics. Now *that* life is behind you because, out of the blue, a teacher stood on the seashore and called your name. You still cannot believe you simply stood up in the boat, said goodbye to your father, and walked away. But you did.

I repeat: What a week it has been! The only familiar faces in your life now are the faces of your brother John and your friends, Peter and Andrew—and slowly, slowly, the face of Jesus seems like a face you have known all your life, but without a name. Still in shock, he led you on that first day into a synagogue where he did what a rabbi does: he opened a scroll and read from the law and the prophets, words you have known since you were your children’s ages. But something was different. Hard to explain, but when he read, the words seemed as though they were from God’s mouth to your ears; and because you had left everything and everyone, you listened as though your life depended upon hearing the truth he had to tell you. He was becoming your only trust and help.

One verse from that first morning keeps playing over and over again in your memory: “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” Day by day, watching him, you say to yourself, “This is what it looks like to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God.” To be human. You are literally walking in his shadow, but it is more and more like walking in his light.

At first, you thought it was by chance Jesus kept running into people who were sick or outcast because of their diseases. Some were lame, others blind; lepers shouted at him; beggars asked him for money; women touched his cloak. These were the people you had spent your life avoiding, averting your eyes and quickening your step; but a few days ago you began to realize that seeing them had become your life. No matter where you thought you were going with Jesus, these people in need became your destination. He stopped, he saw them, he listened to their lives, he had compassion and, with a touch, a word, a glance heavenward, he made them whole. Men and women and children with no future were given the help and the hope they could never have earned or deserved in an Empire that considered them refuse, lazy, subhuman. Gratitude overwhelmed them; they literally danced down the road and back to their villages. You found yourself now not avoiding the sick and diseased and the broken: you walked hoping to run into another and then another because their lives restored gave you a joy you had never known before. You were being made whole too!

It must have been about the middle of the week, however, when the chance meetings on the road turned into crowds. You were walking in Syria, by then, and it was as though half the population had fled their villages of death because word had reached them, through a friend healed or a family member cured, that someone existed on earth who was making all things new. In a way, you thought, these poor people were doing just what you had done: they were leaving everything in order to be with Jesus. The only difference was that they instinctively knew their lives depended on him and you are only just beginning to discover this.

Day after day, you witness him giving himself completely to these hundreds of vulnerable people and freeing them from whatever physical or psychological burden death had imposed on them. There were demoniacs who left with their minds, paralytics who walked all the way home, epileptics set free from seizures, lepers who were restored to the community. Love defeating death before your very eyes! And even though you did not consciously do anything more than witness all these things, you began to realize that the hurting, helpless, faceless categories in your mind had become, through your relationship with Jesus, real human beings whose struggles and fears and hopes were becoming your own. They were not problems to manage or sinners being punished or misfits to avoid; they were a whole new family given to you by a love that had no boundaries or conditions or limits.

What a week it has been! Still, you are exhausted and glad when Jesus finally appears to be taking some time to rest on the little mountain you hiked up this morning. From its height, you look down on the Sea of Galilee where you used to be a fisherman. The crowds are clamoring up the mountain and it occurs to you that he is teaching you to fish for people. Then, just as you are ready to stretch out for a nap, he begins to teach. Again, in him, you hear God addressing you directly, getting specific about doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly. Like Moses on another mountain, his words are reordering your way of seeing. The exacting code of honor and shame that had dictated your judgment of others and your feelings about yourself is being turned inside-out and upside down with each word.

“Honored are the poor in spirit,” he says, and your imagination is filled with the faces of poverty you met this week because you were with him. In your previous life without him, they were shamed! “Honored are those who mourn,” and you remember the shoulders heaving as he held the grieving along the way. “Honored are the meek” and you think of the voiceless and forgotten and shunned by the empire who were drawn to him because he saw in them the unrepeatable human being God had put on earth for a purpose no emperor or ruler could thwart. “Honored are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Even those who had only known the rejection of their fellow human beings and longed for life to be otherwise were met in him with the life that was life. It was as though he had taken the human situation of each one—their poverty, sorrow, humiliation, and longing—as his own. Their condition was no longer theirs but his, which is why they left rejoicing.

But more. He is speaking now about being merciful, pure in heart, a peacemaker, and persecuted for righteousness’ sake and you are thinking that you had no clue what mercy was before you left everything to be with him; that you have never known a heart as guileless as his, whose only motive is the joy and fullness of life for the other. He created shalom where before there was enmity. Too soon you will also see the power of God’s love making him fearless in the face of those threatening him with death.

But suddenly you hear a pronoun that snaps you to attention: Honored are you, he is saying: “Honored are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” You sit up and suck in your breath. People will hate you and hurt you and lie about you too—simply because you are his disciple? What about that joy you felt? Was it just a passing emotion? Then he says as though he is reading your mind, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.” Not your reward *will be* great but your reward *is* great in heaven. You realize that if heaven is where God is coming toward you, heaven is somehow being in the company of Jesus; and so far, in his company, the joy and gladness is beyond what you could have asked or imagined.

I repeat: What a week it has been! You wake up in the morning and you have no idea what utterly unimaginable thing is going to happen today. You lie down to sleep at night and your mind still keeps turning over and over the different future unfolding before you. Things are coming at you so quickly, you can barely process them. The ground beneath you is shifting so radically, you can hardly keep your balance. The decrees of the empire are unrelenting. Maybe you are still in the boat, mending your nets, waiting for tax cuts and deregulation to be announced, wondering what all this will mean for your business, convincing yourself that your profit outweighs the mounting losses that others seems to be experiencing, still confident that your good fortune will make all boats rise.

Or maybe you set out last week with Jesus. Your eyes and heart and mind belong to him as you walk along the Syrian border where a multitude wait to be saved. You are witnessing the events from below, from the perspective of the poor in spirit and those who mourn in anticipation of what will be lost; from the perspective of the meek whose voices are being shamed and the growing numbers who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s words come to mind and address you as never before:

We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short from the perspective of those who suffer. The important thing is that neither bitterness nor envy should have gnawed at the heart during this time, that we should have come to look with new eyes at the matters great and small, sorrow and joy, strength and weakness, that our perception of generosity, humanity, justice and mercy should have become clearer, freer, less corruptible. We have to learn that personal suffering is a more effective key, a more rewarding principle for exploring the world in thought and action than personal good fortune.

You wonder when your following him will begin to cause friends and colleagues to revile you. No matter, because this is the week when it began to dawn on you that the time has come to get serious about discipleship. Thanks be to God.