

## Strangers, sojourners, and subversives

Matthew 5:1-10

November 4, 2007

Let me tell you what I think you want.

I think you want to live a good life. You want to be engaged in work that is satisfying and meaningful, work that generates enough income -- not to make you crazy rich -- but enough, or just a little bit more than enough, to allow you to live comfortably and to do what you want to do.

You want to be respected, respected by the members of your family and by your peers and by your neighbors. You want to be appreciated. You want to be well-thought of. You want to be, not necessarily a pillar of the community, but surely an important and valued contributor to the community.

You want to feel settled living where you're living and doing what you're doing. You want to feel at home, to feel like you fit in, to feel like your neighborhood and your community fit you.

I am confident that this is what you want, because this is what I want! I want to feel settled. I want to be respected. I want to do work that is satisfying and meaningful, work that is appreciated and valued.

And we want the same things for our church. We want to be engaged in work that is satisfying and meaningful. We want to think that we do make a difference, not just among our own folk, but in the wider community and even in the world. We want the respect of our neighbors. We want to be well-thought of by our fellow citizens. We want to be seen as a pillar of the community, a vital and valued contributor to its successes. We want to feel at home here, that we belong here, that we are wanted here.

We want to live a good life. We want to live well and comfortably and productively and peacefully, enjoying the recognition and support and esteem of our neighbors.

But Jesus imagines a different fate for his followers: *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake*. Jesus' expectation seems to be not that his followers would live good lives, but that they would live lives for good. Jesus' expectation is that they would live *for righteousness' sake*, that they would live for the sake of what God wants. Sometimes the two aims overlap -- living for good makes for a good life -- but not always.

The New Testament consistently portrays the church as a minority community, a countercultural community, a persecuted community. The New Testament church was a minority community for good cultural and historical reasons. It was a break-off sect from a Jewish community that was itself in the minority, an often oppressed minority.

But the New Testament church also found itself outside the cultural mainstream for good spiritual and theological reasons. In this world, Jesus and his followers are strangers, sojourners, and subversives.

Jesus and his faithful followers are strangers. Jesus came into the world, but  
*the world did not recognize him.*

He came to his own people,

*but his own people did not receive him (John 1).*

Jesus told his followers to expect a similar reception.

*If you belonged to this world, then the world would love you as its own ... but I chose you from this world, and you do not belong to it; that is why the world hates you (John 15).*

Jesus and his faithful followers are sojourners.

*Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lie down and rest (Matthew 8).*

*It was in faith that all these persons died ... they did not receive the things God had promised, but from a long way off they saw them and welcomed them, and admitted openly that they were strangers and refugees on earth (Hebrews 11).*

Jesus and his followers are subversives. Jesus does not do as the world does. He does not give as the world gives. Instead, Jesus openly challenged the authority and integrity and values and practices of the leaders of his community. And his faithful followers are expected to do the same.

*Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind (Romans 12).*

Faithful followers of Jesus, then and now, are a subversive community, people who do not just "fit in." They are people who do not do what is expedient, but what is right; people who do not bow to the will of the majority, but submit only to the will of a single One, their Lord; people who do not accept the prevailing wisdom, but always seek the truth.

They are people who do not make personal gain or even corporate gain a first priority, believing that God will provide. They are generous to a fault, giving even when it's risky to give, giving not on the basis of a careful calculation of what they can afford, but on the basis of their need to give. They believe that all good gifts come from heaven above, and that the bounty of this earth is meant to be enjoyed and shared by all.

They are people who do not make personal security or even national security a first priority, believing that God will protect. They will put themselves at risk for the sake of the kingdom. They will sacrifice their own comfort and safety to save even one human soul. They believe that love is stronger than hate, that peace is not a result but a way, that mercy is not earned but given.

They are people who speak up for those who are ignored and stand up for those who are overlooked. They defend the defenseless and give to the poor, challenge the proud and console the helpless. They love God above everything else because love is the greatest commandment and their first duty. They love their friends and neighbors as

much as they love themselves because love is the greatest commandment and their first duty. And they love even their enemies as much as they love themselves because love is the greatest commandment and their first duty.

Faithful followers of Jesus, then and now, are a subversive community, and faithful followers of Jesus, then and now, are a persecuted community. Authority does not like to be questioned or ignored. The conforming majority does not like to be questioned or ignored. People who go their own way, who follow their own leader, who cut against the cultural grain, are a nuisance, a threat, outcasts, troublemakers. And they may be ignored, derided, shunned, laughed at, harassed, denounced, persecuted.

But wait! We are not persecuted. The church in our community, the church in our nation, is not persecuted. We do fit in. We do get along. We are in sync with the cultural mainstream.

If that is so, may God have mercy on us! For it must mean that we have set our hearts on the promises of this world instead of God's promises. It must mean that we have chosen to seek the kingdom of this world instead of God's kingdom. It must mean that we have conformed ourselves to the standards of this world, and have resisted the transforming power of God to change our minds and redirect our hearts.

Faithful followers of Jesus, then and now, are a subversive community, and faithful followers of Jesus, then and now, are a persecuted community, and faithful followers of Jesus, then and now, are a blessed community.

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them!*

Faithful followers of Jesus may be strangers and sojourners and subversives here and now, but they are no strangers to the kingdom of God! The kingdom of God belongs to them! And the kingdom of God begins ... here and now!

Jesus came to his own country, to his own people -- to God's country, to God's people -- announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand. Do you see it? Jesus was a stranger, in his own home! Jesus was a sojourner, in his own land! Jesus was a subversive, because that home and that land had been subverted from its intended purpose. He came as a stranger to claim it again for God. He came as a sojourner inviting us to go with him, inviting us to follow with him the path that leads us home!

Which path will you choose? The comfortable, well-worn path that feels like home, but leads nowhere? Or the difficulty and dangerous and sometimes lonely path that marks you as a stranger, but leads you home?