

“In the footsteps of God”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
January 29, 2023

Micah 6:6-8 and Matthew 5:1-12

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

There are two questions we all need to ask: What kind of God are we being asked to serve? And what does it mean to walk with that God?

Do we serve a loving God, or a vengeful one? Is God close and touchable, or distant and abstract? Does God stand with the powerful or the oppressed? Does God cry?

These—and many more—form the basis of the history of religion, war, power, poverty, and justice. What kind of God is this? And what kind of people are we to be?

When we arrive at the fifth chapter of Matthew, which we just read, Jesus has just begun his ministry. He’s called his disciples. But all he’s said to them is: “Follow me.” They’re probably wondering what to expect. Jesus is telling everyone that the kingdom of God is near—but what *kind* of God?

The disciples weren’t the first to ask this question. It’s what prompted Moses to go up a mountain (just like Jesus) and come down with the Ten Commandments and the Law. God says, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Who is God, according to Moses? God is one who hears the people cry and leads them to freedom. What does it mean to walk with this God? It means to worship this God alone and to protect the vulnerable—to uphold laws that ensure respect and prevent murder, theft, and generational slavery.

These are the same questions that the prophets will explore. Micah 6 begins with a person asking, “With what shall I come before the Lord?” Should I bring burnt offerings? How much is enough to prove my faithfulness? A thousand rams? Ten thousand rivers of oil? My first born child?

What kind of God is this, and what does this God ask of me?

We heard today the prophet’s answer: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

When Jesus walks up that mountain, just as Moses and Micah once did, Jesus is preparing to answer these two questions. He gives his famous Sermon on the Mount, his first recorded sermon of the Gospel, and he begins with the Beatitudes we heard today, a series of surprising blessings.

When the January/February ministry team met, Carolyn Hiza brilliantly described this sermon as Jesus' course syllabus. The disciples have enrolled in Jesus College, and now Jesus is laying out what they can expect to learn and do as his disciples. I love that description! In fact, I ran a Google search to see if anyone had ever thought of this, and I couldn't find anything.

The only thing I found was an article I read last year, in the satirical magazine *McSweeney's*. In it, the author, Amanda Lehr, imagines "Selected Negative Teaching Evaluations of Jesus Christ." It was the magazine's fourth most read article of the year. Here's a sampling of the reviews:

"Very inconvenient class! Always holds lectures on top of mountains, in middle of the Sea of Galilee—but never close to the main campus."

"Kind of absent-minded. My name's Simon, and he's called me 'Peter' for the entire semester."

"Doesn't respect students' time. A line of us had been waiting outside his office for over an hour. Finally, he showed up, said, 'And the last shall be first,' and started seeing us in reverse order. Made me late for work-study."

"Feels like a class for farmers. Hope you like talking about seeds. Wheat seeds. Mustard seeds. Seeds, seeds, seeds."

"Won't give straight answers. I asked him if something was going to be on the test, and he said, 'You say that it will be,' and stared at me with no expression. I mean, come on, bro."

"Plays favorites. (Sorry, we can't all be John 'The Beloved.')

"Inconsistent attendance policy. Said we had to be in class by 9:00 a.m. every day. Over half the class showed up late or didn't attend until the last meeting, but we all got the same participation grade."

"I asked him to sign my accommodations form from the Disability Services Office, and he spit on the ground and rubbed the dirt in my eyes. I can see now, but it was still rude."

I have a feeling that these students did not read the syllabus. In fact, a lot of us become Christians without ever really knowing what we're signing up for. So I thought I would imagine Jesus' syllabus for his class Discipleship 101, based on his Sermon on the Mount. [[Review the syllabus.](#)]

Now, each of these topics could take many sermons to fully explore. Remember this is just the syllabus. But what matters is that, over the course of this sermon, Jesus tells his disciples—and thus us as well—who and what we've committed to. He helps them understand the God they're walking with. The emphasis in this syllabus is less on what they do and more on what God does for them.

When Jesus lists his blessings, he isn't telling them to grieve and suffer. He's telling them that when they do (because that's life, right?), God will be there to comfort them. He's saying that this is a God who walks with the hurting and the oppressed and the poor. This is a merciful God, a grieving God, a righteous and just God.

This is foremost a course in grace. Yes, we are asked to walk in the footsteps of God. But God walks first. We follow, and are often carried. In this class, you will come to see God; you'll be so close to God that you'll come to call God *Abba*, Father, Mother.

If you dare to follow in the footsteps of this God, you'll find yourself also in the company of the poor, the grieving, and those who are hungry for justice. You will experience mercy and learn how both to give and receive it. You will enter conflict and become peacemakers. You will learn how to face suffering and perceive God's presence with you in the hardest times. You will learn justice, and when your hunger for the world to be right is so strong that you ache, God will fill you. You will learn kindness and humility. For this is the God you serve: One who comes among you, in the flesh, to serve you. **Amen.**