

Matthew 5:1-12

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Samantha Evans

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A Meaningful Invitation

Last week, after worship, we had our very first Sermon Talk Back. Where probably 30 folks gathered together in the Fireside Room to discuss the sermon, the Scripture, and our lives together. I'm super thankful for the ways that folks shared with one another about their journeys and understanding of how God has moved in their lives and how Scripture has informed and guided their journeys.

One of threads we followed in our discussion revolved specifically around how Jesus recruiting and teaching and even sending his disciples. My friend, Allen Bartu, rightly pointed out that Jesus does this through the power of invitation. He doesn't use coercion or force. He doesn't demand that people follow him and do as he says.

He extends an invitation to participate in what he is up to in the world. So, this got me thinking. As I sat down this week with the text before us, these well-known Beatitudes, it struck me that you can read this as one big Meaningful Invitation, which is a concept coined by my favorite organizer and author, Peter Block, and also the title of this sermon.

I am sure that I've mentioned his name to most of you. And that is because outside of Scripture and maybe John Calvin's Institutes, Block's flagship book, called *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, is the most formative and foundational text for my own understanding and practice of ministry.

Block asserts that if a community is to be truly transformed, then all members of the community must take an active role in transforming. That all members shall come to the table to dream and envision, plan and enact who and how they shall be. And Block says that the first step on our journey of transformation is to extend a Meaningful Invitation to all members of the community. And he lays out 5 elements that make an invitation meaningful.

He says:

1. That you must first: Declare the possibility of the gathering. What is possible if folks accept this invitation?
2. The next component is to: Frame the choice. If it is truly an invitation, then the receiver is free to say no. There are no consequences for declining the invitation.

3. Though there are no consequences for saying no, however, saying yes, accepting the invitation will come with a cost or requirement. So, the next important element of a meaningful invitation is clearly Name that Hurdle.
4. One should finish the invitation by reinforcing the request. Reminding folks what is possible and why it matters that they accept this invitation.
5. And Block says that the final element of a meaningful invitation, is that the one doing the inviting should decide on the most personal form possible.¹

Like a Sermon on the Mount. These elements of a meaningful invitation are all present in this well-known and often read Scripture, and I find it to be super powerful to read this text like an invitation. To consider Jesus' call to follow him, to proclaim the good news and to live into the kingdom of heaven an actual invitation.

Jesus stands on this mountain, elevated above thousands of people, who have travelled from near and far to hear what this guy has to say. With all these eyes on him and ears straining to hear what he has to say, Jesus finds himself in possession of immense power and authority.

From this vantage place, he could have said or done anything, and these people, having seen and heard about what he is capable of, the curing of disease and healing of minds, bodies, and souls, they would have followed him wherever he led. They would have done whatever he commanded. They have accepted anything he said as truth.

But Jesus resists the temptation to use his power to coerce or manipulate those entrusted to his care. He resists the temptation to command or pressure them into following him. He forsakes the worldly use of power and instead he extends a meaningful invitation to participate.

He begins by describing the values of the kingdom: humility, mercy, peacemaking. He offers a promise of blessedness for those who practice these values. He paints a picture of the Beloved Community, the Peaceable Kingdom, the kind of life together that we yearn for.

He describes what the world could look like if his hearers were to accept his invitation. What would be possible should they decide to be meek and humble.

¹ Block, Peter. *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (p. 119). Berrett-Koehler Publishers. Kindle Edition.

Should they become hungry for righteousness. Should they become merciful, peacemakers. Should they accept Jesus' invitation to live counter to the ways of the world, they will be blessed. They will be filled. They will receive mercy and they will be called children of God.

Jesus offers a vision of what is possible should his hearers accept his invitation. And because this is a meaningful invitation, he doesn't say anything about what would happen should these hearers decline it. He does not say, if you do not do these things or live by these values, then you will...fill in the blank with some horrifying consequence. He does not use fear or coercion or even shame or guilt.

Jesus doesn't name a single consequence for denying his invitation, but he does name the consequences for accepting it. Which is probably the most important element of a meaningful invitation. The one doing the inviting has a responsibility to very clearly name the cost. What will be required of one who accepts this invitation?

Jesus does not mince words here, he says: People will lie about you. They will revile you. They will persecute you, like the prophets before you. If you accept this invitation, your price of admission will be very high. It may even be your life.

Jesus finishes his invitation by reminding his hearers what is possible should they decide that the cost is worth it. Take heart, he says, rejoice and be glad. For remember, if you do accept this invitation, you will be blessed. You will be filled. You will be called children of God and citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

This kingdom operates by a very different value system than that of the world, and it cannot be heralded in using the tools of this world. So, force and coercion have no place in this process. For the kingdom of heaven is built with humility, mercy, and peacemaking. It is built by citizens who willingly sacrifice their own power and privilege. It is built by citizens who have been invited.

This day and every day, Jesus extends to us the same invitation. To follow him. To live by the values of the kingdom of heaven. In the words of the prophet Micah: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah, Mary, Elizabeth, John and Jesus, the God of our ancestors, who has created us, named us God's children, and invited us to be citizens in the kingdom God is creating.

This God is not an angry God. One who demands burnt offerings of calves and rams, rivers of oil or our first-born. This God is not a God of vengeance, requiring us to beat ourselves up when we don't get it quite right. This God of ours is not a God of

force or coercion. God is not interested in forcing us into a relationship, not interested in coercing us through strength or threat of punishment, not interested in winning our love through shame or guilt.

That's just not who our God is. We have inherited this theological tradition. We have received an account of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, who reveals to the world who God is and what God is about. And what we find is that our God is a God of justice, of steadfast love and faithfulness, a God of humility, mercy, and peace. And our God extends to us, this day and every day, a meaningful invitation to participate in what God is up to in the world.

And if we decide to accept this invitation, it will require risk and sacrifice, but what will be possible is beyond our wildest imagination, beyond what we are able to articulate, beyond what we are able to create on our own through worldly means.

What will be possible is the kingdom of heaven. Where we will be blessed. Where we will be filled. Where we will receive mercy and be called children of God. Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Triune God, who Creates, Sustains, and Redeems us all. Amen.