

**FPCU World Communion Sunday 2026
Longing for Justice**

Rev. Dr. Tina Blair

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

The students at Cornell University are upset and speaking out about the alleged gang rape at a fraternity house 2 years ago which was not investigated adequately by the DA. Women are sharing their similar experiences at frat houses, often voicing them for the first time. “It’s not just about protecting the daughters,” they cry, “It’s about educating the sons.”

Proverbs 31:8-9 declares: “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out; judge righteously; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” Those young women are speaking out!

The UN Human Right Council report this summer on Gaza documented at least 20,179 children killed and 44,143 injured. Following the confirmed famine in August 2025 and subsequent increases in humanitarian aid by mid-2026, acute malnutrition dropped significantly. However, 12.2% of children remain chronically malnourished (stunted), posing risks of permanent developmental damage. After two years of war and intense bombardments, Gaza’s education system stands on the brink of collapse. More than 97 percent of schools have been damaged or destroyed.

The prophet Jeremiah declares: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Act with justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.’” Jeremiah 22:3 Is there is no justice for these children?

Jesus stands firmly in his Jewish faith tradition and the Hebrew scriptures as he speaks today to us as a prophet.

The Beatitudes, you will remember, are setting the stage for Jesus’ ministry, letting us know what he is all about. Today we hear: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” This verse introduces the teaching Jesus later proclaims. Let’s dig deeply into these words and understand their richness.

William Barclay's commentary on this verse begins with asking us to remember what it is like to hunger and thirst. Not just like being thirsty because it is a hot day; not just hungry because we forgotten lunch, and have been working all day without food. Have you ever been on the edge of dying because of lack of food? About to collapse for lack of water? I hope that none of you have! But we can imagine it, I'm sure. And we mourn whenever we learn of people who are experiencing just that in parts of the world. And then we too feel (a little) the hunger and thirst Jesus is talking about – a deep, deep need; a deep longing as if our life depends on it. Blessed are those with this longing, with this hunger!

What is it a longing for? The rabbis and the scholars and the church all agree – it's a longing for God's righteousness, for God's justice and goodness. "Your will be done, O Lord!" we cry. And what is God's will? How do God's justice and goodness manifest themselves to us? That's why I began with today's news – to help us remember our longings and the words of God, spoken by the prophets.

God wants a world of justice for every single human being and every part of the creation. No one should be enslaved, or starving, or unhoused, or naked, or fleeing their homeland. The prophets share God's voice with us:

From Isaiah: "Learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow." (1:17)

From Amos: "Because you trample on the poor and take from the levies of grain...and push aside the needy in the gate... it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live... and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph." (5:10-15)

But God's justice goes even farther than demanding that we care for those in need. God's justice includes extreme compassion. God's justice includes mercy.

In the story of Noah, God is angry at the evil that has filled the world, at the ways people no longer listen for God's voice. So the Lord of Creation decides it's time to destroy this creation and start over with a new one. But he finds one righteous man and his family and saves them. After the Flood, God makes a covenant with Noah, sealed by turning a weapon of war, the bow, into a weapon of peace – a rainbow. God declares:

¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

God changes his judgment of destruction, even though God realizes that evil will come again. God decides to walk with us instead. God decides to become fully human and walk with us in Jesus Christ. Jesus not only saves us through his death and resurrection – Jesus saves us by **living** as a human being. He teaches and demonstrates how to live out God’s goodness and righteousness, which includes compassion and forgiveness, and a change of heart.

What does Jesus’ life show us? He teaches about righteousness and justice – which in Greek has the same root. In Matthew 10, Jesus declares:

“and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” (Mt. 10:42)

In Mt. 25, in the Parable of the sheep and goats, the sheep ask the king:

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’

Jesus models these words, as well. He reaches out to the most despised social outcasts: the lepers, the prostitutes, the insane, the sick, the tax collector. He heals and welcomes and eats with them, accepting their gifts, showing compassion, restoring them to a life of normality. He breaks all the social and religious rules by doing this. Each person, for Jesus, is God’s unique creation and child, deserving help and healing, deserving to receive God’s goodness.

Sebastian, an active member of the American Church in Paris, was a refugee from Nigeria when I was one of the pastors there. He fled for political reasons and was

applying for asylum, but his reasons seemed weak to the authorities. If he were to be sent back he would be killed. I went to court with him to try to explain the religious situation to these secular authorities, but they wouldn't let me speak. I think that eventually he was able to stay, but it was a fearful time.

Gloria, another active member, fled Liberia because of civil war and hunger. She couldn't file for political asylum, so she lived under the radar. But there was no way for her to get back and to survive if she did. Did she deserve justice less than Sebastian?

I loved these children of God. They, and all the others I met in Paris fleeing dire situations, deserve the goodness of life: of safety, food and shelter. I longed for the world to find ways to help all these refugees flooding Europe from war-torn or famine-filled countries.

I believe Jesus words' lead us, here in at Upland at First Church, in several ways.

First, let's examine the ways in which we think of people who seem different from us. I think that each one of us (including me!), needs to examine our own conscience. And we may need to think about how accepting we are as a congregation. Who is it that makes you, that makes me, uncomfortable? Foreigners? Someone from the LBGTQIA etc. community? An unhoused person? Someone here illegally?

We want to be a welcoming church. What are the requirements to join? Our Presbyterian Constitution, the Book of Order, gives the requirements:

A congregation shall welcome all persons who trust in God's grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become part of the fellowship and ministry of his Church (F-1.0403). **No person shall be denied membership for any reason not related to profession of faith.** The Gospel leads members to extend the fellowship of Christ to all persons. Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the Gospel.

Jesus welcomes everyone who wants to follow him, whatever their lifestyle, race, gender, marital status, disability, legal status, etc. We are called to do likewise, welcoming everyone who walks in the door, as if we were welcoming Jesus himself!

Second, as we move forward to implement the dreams laid out in our Mission Study, let's strengthen our Serve Team. We do great missions in Africa. William is doing a wonderful job leading the whole team, including some local missions. But could we do more? We are living in a time of great stress. What else could we be doing? There are church groups working to help fearful immigrants get food, others visiting the Adelanto detention center bringing food and hope. We here are already helping out with hunger bags and drives for supplies – what else are we called to do?

Session is also looking into re-establishing an outreach team, just as we started the Connect Team. Are we ready to do this? Do any of you feel that pull, that call, to be involved in these ways?

Everyone of us has a deep longing, a deep hunger and thirst, for goodness and righteousness to win out. But it is a painful, sometimes hopeless feeling of longing that we often avoid. Jesus is asking us to let ourselves feel this hunger and thirst, for then we are blessed. Jesus invites us to join him in this work.

Receive, then, his blessing on you: Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for goodness, for justice, for righteousness! You shall be satisfied! **Amen.**

Please stand, and let's affirm the Mission Statement of this church, which lays out what our faith calls us to do:

Growing in Christ, Making Him Known, Welcoming All

First Presbyterian Church of Upland is rooted in God's grace, committed to spiritual growth across all generations, and dedicated to making Christ known through faithful witness, authentic relationships, generous hospitality, and compassionate service.

