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“Speak Into Being” – Dwelling in the Word Matthew 5:1-12, “Combatting the Plague”

For 11 years now we have practiced the corporate spiritual discipline of dwelling with a particular scripture passage over several Sundays. I have found great value to this practice. It allows us extended time to dwell with and dig into God’s Word. I liken it to a good cup of hot tea, and the Dwelling in the Word provides the environment to allow the tea bag to steep to bring out the rich depth of flavors.

Today begins four Sundays of Dwelling in the Word from the Gospel of Matthew. The specific text is often referred to as the Beatitudes. Last week Pastor Terry Zehr, our candidate of choice for Pastor of Senior Ministries, talked in his sermon about the significance of taking a step back from the immediate text to get a better sense of the bigger picture. Terry continued on to say that sometimes one needs to take several steps back to see how it all fits together.

This morning then the first step back from our text would have us realizing that the Beatitudes are part of a larger literary unit often called the Sermon on the Mount which is found in chapters 5 through 7. This text has been foundational to Anabaptists and Mennonites throughout the centuries, and I suspect that many of us have even memorized parts of it. As Anabaptists we claim a Christocentric faith and theology, and therefore we look to the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus to provide meaning and direction for our shared life together. The Sermon on the Mount is a long extended teaching from Jesus that helps shape our community, our practice, and our witness in the world.

The next step back would have us seeing how the Beatitudes are part of Matthew’s Gospel. In this Gospel we see connections of Jesus back to Moses, and the significance that

Matthew places on Jesus' role as teacher. For example, in this Gospel we find several long sermons and teachings from Jesus, further emphasizing this role.

We have the advantage of having the entire book of Matthew, as well as the entire Bible at our fingertips. So in essence, we already know how the story ends. However, if we just focused on Matthew we could turn back to chapter 1 and begin with Jesus' genealogy. If we continued reading we would hear the story of Jesus' birth, the visit of the Magi, Jesus' parents hiding him, John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, Jesus calling the first disciples, and Jesus healing the sick. Then we would arrive to our text in chapter 5. If you have your bibles turn with me to verse 1.

Beginning in verse 1 we read: "Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down." In the larger biblical story we know that when people go up on the mountain that things happen. Spiritual things happen. Transformative things happen. We know that God shows up. Just in this Gospel Jesus' third temptation happened on a mountain and later on in the book a mountain will be the setting when Jesus gives the Great Commission. Back in the Old Testament Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the 10 Commandments and Elijah climbed a mountain and met God in the silence. When people are called up the mountain we know that this is a good indicator that something significant, something life changing just might happen.

The text goes on to say that the "disciples came to Jesus, and Jesus began to teach them." This presents the image of a cozy little scene of Jesus being surrounded by his newly called disciples. And while he is surrounded by them, we also know from the comment in chapter 7 verse 28 that the crowds had followed them up the mountain and had listened to the teaching.

So again, keeping the context in mind, this is the very beginning of creating this new community, establishing this new kingdom, and how does Jesus begin? What does he say to help formulate who they will be under his leadership, what their mission will be, how they shall live? Does he begin by rehearsing Old Testament Law? By expelling a long list of do's and do not's? No. Instead Jesus begins with this list of what we call the Beatitudes. In essence Jesus begins by declaring "I bless you, and furthermore, those in my new radical community will be people of blessing, not cursing."

Now at first glance we might not see anything strange about Jesus' preferred way of beginning to establish this new community. However, as we begin to read the Beatitudes we see that as Jesus is establishing this new community he is also ushering in a new way of being, a new way of seeing, and a whole new set of values and realities that are esteemed and lifted up. In case you ever wondered if Jesus preached a prosperity gospel, you know follow me and your life will be easier and more successful, you don't have to look beyond his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, and especially in the Beatitudes, to see that his sense of prosperity does not match our preconceived notions in at least North America.

If our culture wrote the Beatitudes, with our cultural lenses we might say:

"Blessed are the well-educated, for they will get the good jobs.  
 Blessed are the well-connected, for their aspirations will not go unnoticed.  
 Blessed are you when you know what you want, and go after it with everything you've got, for God helps those who help themselves.  
 If we are honest, we must admit that the world Jesus asserts as fact, is not the world we have made for ourselves."<sup>i</sup>

Jesus though begins the creation of his new community by telling them that they are blessed. It is significant that Jesus begins his lengthy sermon with this. It is as if Jesus knew that the disciples (and us) needed to hear this first, that they are blessed, that God promises God's presence and favor to be with them, before they can begin to hear and try to live out the rest of

the Sermon on the Mount. It is as if Jesus is saying before we get into all the nitty gritty of God's kingdom there are a couple vital things you must understand. "First, you are blessed people. Secondly, God's kingdom, in which you dwell, is both here and not fully here yet. And thirdly, my values won't align with the world's. Let me describe to you the attributes and values I see in God's kingdom. Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and more." Jesus' description of his community is vastly different from the surrounding culture of his day and clearly ours.

For example, today if you heard that someone was truly blessed our minds usually automatically go to assuming that someone possess wealth, fame, power, success, or an easy life. This label of being blessed calls forth this inner desire to perhaps want to be like someone else, to accomplish what he or she has accomplished, and to be noted for such accomplishments. However, this is not what Jesus is talking about. Not only is he ushering in a new kingdom, but he is asserting that to dwell and thrive in his kingdom we must also gain a different perspective and receive reorienting kingdom glasses. Part of this reorienting is learning a biblical understanding of what it means to be blessed.

This biblical understanding is rooted in the Old Testament and within "Barak" (baw-rock) the Hebrew word for blessing. This Hebrew word conveys the idea of being strengthened, or our weakness being compensated for and with God's strength. In the Old Testament we see incidents of God blessing humans, humans blessing God, and humans imparting blessings to fellow humans. The action of blessing is imparting of well-being or peace, and it is more than that. Blessing can be understood as favor, unique standing, permission, empowerment, endowment, God's promise of regard, presence, accompaniment, and above all, worth. This

week I read how one scholar challenges us to not try to put into words *what* a blessing means but instead to consider what a blessing *feels* like. And so he writes,

What does it feel like when you're blessed? And by asking the question this way, I begin to get a sense of Jesus' promise. To be blessed feels like you have someone's unconditional regard. It feels like you are not and will not be alone, like you will be accompanied wherever you go. Being blessed feels like you have the capacity to rise above present circumstances, like you are more than the sum of your parts or past experiences. Being blessed feels like you have worth -- not because of something you did or might do, but simply because of who you are,<sup>ii</sup>

A created and beloved child of God. As we hold onto this concept we also can name that a blessing also takes on a quality of the sacramental, so that when we experience and embrace being blessed by God more happens than can be explained with words.

Sometimes we look at these Beatitudes and assume that they must be a measuring stick for how well we are doing following Jesus. So we read "Blessed are the pure in Spirit" and we begin panicking wondering, "Am I pure enough?" or "How in the world do I get purer in my Spirit?" However, the list we "find here is in the indicative mood, not the imperative. It is description, not prescription."<sup>iii</sup> Jesus is looking at the new community and saying that there are people among you who are poor in spirit. There are people who hunger and thirst for righteousness, or are mourning, who are meek. Bless them. This blessing is done within a community. One cannot live out the callings of the Sermon on the Mount alone. It is intended for the community and to be lived out in the community.

Even while many of us have memorized this list, we still struggle with the Beatitudes. In terms of starting a long sermon, on the surface they surely don't leave you with lots of warm fuzzy feelings, eager to jump up and sign up for this new community, this new kingdom. And yet

this week I found myself deeply resonating with Pastor David Lose who writes that as he sat with the Beatitudes he began to wonder

Whether our difficulty with the Beatitudes isn't symptomatic of a larger problem most of us have namely, that we are far less eager to be blessed than God is to bless us. Or maybe "eager" isn't quite the right word. Maybe it's more that we have a hard time believing God wants to bless us in the first place. It may be that our picture of God is distorted, that we can only imagine God as a stern, demanding law-giver, and so it seems out of character for God to bless without requirement...Or maybe it's not that we don't know God well enough to recognize God's grace, maybe it's that we know ourselves too well to feel worthy of that grace...we may find it hard to believe God loves us unconditionally... We're used to... toeing the line and reaping the consequences when we don't, and so it may not only be unexpected, but downright unsettling and nearly inconceivable to imagine that God behaves differently, showering us with blessing apart from anything we have done, earned, or deserve.

But let's be clear... Jesus... is just plain blessing people. All kinds of people. All kinds of down-and-out, extremely vulnerable, and at the bottom of the ladder people. Why? To proclaim that God regularly shows up in mercy and blessing just where you least expect God to be -- with the poor rather than the rich, those who are mourning rather than celebrating, the meek and the peacemakers rather than the strong and victorious. This is not where citizens of the ancient world look for God and, quite frankly, it's not where citizens of our own world do either. Jesus is saying (if God shows up here)... then God will be everywhere, showering all creation and its inhabitants with blessing.<sup>iv</sup>

I want to tell that you this morning that each of us are blessed, and assured of God's presence in our lives. As members of God's community we are also called to bless others, to speak words of truth and life and hope into each other's existence. To believe and profess and bless each other with:

“God bless you”

“God is near to you, and may God surround you, flood you, meet you at your deepest need.”

“You, you are a beloved child of God, and may God’s presence hold you and give you the strength you need to wade through your life circumstances.”

“You are blessed. You are not alone. The God of courage is holding you up and breathing resiliency deep into your bones.”

“God bless you”

And I’m not saying that we throw out this blessing, “God bless you,” just after someone sneezes. Achoo --- “God bless you.” Did you ever pause and wonder where that practice came from? To say “God bless you” after someone sneezes? Well it is believed to have originated in the Middle Ages when the bubonic plague was causing death and destruction across Europe. Sneezing happened to be one of the first symptoms of the deadly plague. So the story goes that Pope Gregory the First suggested that when someone heard someone else sneeze they should offer an immediate prayer to protect against the disease and death and to combat the plague.<sup>v</sup> So “The mantra we repeat so regularly developed... as a way to ward off fear of evil, disease, and death.”<sup>vi</sup> Another theory was that when you sneezed your heart stopped, so basically you died. So then saying “God bless you” was a way to call and welcome the sneezer back from the dead.

In the Middle Ages “God bless you” was believed to save someone from death and evil, and to bring them back to life. What if today we reclaim these three words to “signify not fear but joy, not disease but delight, not death but God's new life.”<sup>vii</sup> These words have the power to reorient us to the truth and promise of our blessedness in God. Those words have the power to fight off the plagues we face today. Plagues of fear, self-sufficiency, doubt, feelings of unworthiness, temptation to conform to the patterns of this world. Plagues of shame, hatred, anger, lust, complacency. Plagues that bring havoc and destruction in our hearts and souls, plagues that pull us away from the kingdom of God. These words can remind us that we are blessed and assure us of God’s presence in our lives. These are words that we could build our entire lives on.

Pastor Katie learned a song at a past Mennonite World Conference, and then taught that song to our Worship Band. For our song of response I will invite you to listen to this song which is a recording from our own Worship Band. We will be hearing this song throughout this series of Dwelling in the Word.

May the words of the Beatitudes, the words of this song, and the promise of God's blessing hold you as you ponder the ways your life and our shared life together might be built upon this foundation. God bless you. God be present with you. God grant you new life. God give you kingdom lenses. God bless you.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Lance Pape, "Commentary on Matthew 5:1-12,"

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2203](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2203)

<sup>ii</sup> David Lose, "On Beatitudes and Blessings," <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3020>

<sup>iii</sup> Pape, "Commentary on Matthew 5:1-12,"

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2203](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2203)

<sup>iv</sup> David Lose, "God Bless You," <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1542>

<sup>v</sup> Meghan Overdeep, "The Crazy Reasons we say "Bless You" When Someone Sneezes,"

<https://www.southernliving.com/news/why-we-say-bless-you-after-a-sneeze>

<sup>vi</sup> David Lose, "God Bless You," <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1542>

<sup>vii</sup> David Lose, "God Bless You," <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1542>