

SERMON TITLE: "A Good Word Begins with a Blessing"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 5:1-12
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 6, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

The other day, I heard a radio interview of a guy who works for the Motion Picture Association of America. They're the organization that puts ratings on movies. They decide if the content of a movie warrants a G, PG, PG-13, or an R rating. As well as crude, violent, or sexual images, the Motion Picture Association also considers what language is used. The host of the radio program asked his guest if the ratings standards have changed over the years. Are certain things now allowed in a PG-13 movie, for example, that used to warrant an R? Yes, the man said. As our society is becoming more accustomed to seeing and hearing vulgarity, movie ratings criteria have shifted as well.

Movies aside, all we have to do is listen to the news to realize that our American culture has become much more coarse. What used to be done in private is now being done in public. What used to be merely suggested is now spoken aloud. What used to be condemned as uncivil is now cheered by some as "unguarded" and "authentic." Our public discourse has become a lot edgier and rough.

During this month of August, I want to challenge some of that. I don't think we who are Christians have to accept that "brash is better" or that "telling it like we feel it" is somehow heroic, without regard to whom we hurt or what might be the actual truth.

We of the Judeo-Christian tradition have always believed that God's word and our words are sacred. In fact, many of us can quote the important opening verse of John's Gospel that tells us, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." We also believe that God's-word-who-became-flesh had some important things to say about how we should speak with one another. So, beginning today and continuing throughout this month, I'm going to preach a series of sermons on what a good word is and does. These sermons will be based on Jesus' Sermon on the

Mount in Matthew chapter 5. Today, as we start with the Beatitudes, I invite you to see that a good word begins with a blessing.

1—BEATITUDES ARE BLESSINGS

Matthew 5:1-12 is commonly known as “The Beatitudes.” “Beatitude” is a Latin word that means “blessed.” Sometimes the same New Testament Greek word that is translated as “beatitude” or “blessed” is translated as “happy.” Jesus’ listing of beatitudes describes people who somehow feel blessed and happy not because they have significant possessions, advantages, or power, but because God pronounces a blessing upon them. In spite of their impoverishment and the difficulties of their lives, these believers can feel good because they have an assurance from God that they are OK and that they will be OK.

According to Greek grammar, “blessed are” is a passive verb. This state of happy blessing isn’t dependent on the believer’s actions. This blessing is something that God endows. Even when a person is poor in spirit, even when a person is mourning, even when a person is meek, even when a person is hungry and thirsty for righteousness—God lifts them up and satisfies their needs. Even when a person is merciful, pure in heart, peaceful, and persecuted—traits that are often associated with those who are weak and have no other options—God promises good things.

This doesn’t mean that mourners should be glad that they’re feeling sad. It doesn’t mean that the poor in spirit should feel happy that they are discouraged or that their bank account is diminished. It doesn’t mean that anyone should rush toward situations of persecution. Quite the contrary! These blessings of God are assurances of hope for people who are already in difficult circumstances. These beatitudes are words of compassion and kindness for those who are already suffering from hardship. Those who are already troubled about who and how they are don’t need any more burdens heaped upon them. Jesus spoke these blessings because God is eager to lift up those who are down by helping them realize that God cares for them and that a positive future is coming.

These beatitude blessings remind me of the song of Mary in Luke chapter 2. After Mary learns that she will give birth to a special child, she sings, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me.” In that Christmas narrative, we see how it wasn’t Mary’s strong actions that earned her the blessings of God. It was God’s action of blessing her, *even in her state of lowliness*, that allowed her to see promise for herself and for her child.

Certainly, there are times when some meekness and purity of heart would improve our relationships and our Christian witness. And it definitely doesn’t hurt for us to hunger and thirst for righteousness or to try to become peacemakers. But beatitudes aren’t given as commands of what we should do, and they aren’t given because of what we have done or how good we already are. These blessings of God are given in benevolence. They’re divine gifts from the one who speaks them to us. They are good words that have the power to transform our lives.

Some of you may have heard of the preacher and author Max Lucado. Probably his most famous saying is this one: “If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If [God] had a wallet, your photo would be in it. [God] sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning . . . Face it, friend. [God] is crazy about you!” That’s a blessing. That’s a good word that’s the foundation of everything else. No matter who you are, no matter what you’ve done or not done, no matter what you own or don’t own, no matter what other people think about you—God loves you, and there’s nothing you can do about that.

2—WE CAN AND SHOULD SPEAK BLESSINGS TOO

Do you see how positive those sayings make you feel? A good word begins with a blessing from God. But just as God’s good word to us begins with a blessing that has the power to transform our lives, so we, too, have the power to speak such good words to other people.

Did you ever see the movie called *The Help*? In that film about the racially-segregated south of the early 1960s, actress Viola Davis plays a woman named Aibileen Clark. Aibileen is a black nanny who cares for a little white girl named Mae. Mae's mother is preoccupied and unable to show the love her daughter needs. So Aibileen tries to make up for that lack of maternal affection by regularly telling the little girl the mantra, "You is smart. You is kind. You is important." Despite what we would consider poor grammar, those sentences were amazingly good words of blessing. The movie doesn't show how Mae turned out as an adult. But the hope is planted in us, the onlookers, that maybe, just maybe, the oft-repeated blessing of her nanny would change that little girl's life trajectory. In those good words, the possibility is offered that Mae would rise above her mother's prejudices and troubles.

I think many of us can relate to this type of experience. Someone—a parent, a teacher, an aunt, an uncle, a grandparent, a neighbor, a Boy Scout or Girl Scout leader, a Sunday School teacher, an athletic coach, a pastor, a professional mentor—someone blessed us with the positive message that we had value, that we had potential, that we had skills, that we could make something of ourselves. Someone believed in us and told us so. Specifically, I remember a fifth-grade teacher named Mr. Bivins who told me that I could do anything I wanted with my life. A good word early in a child's life is such a blessing.

But no matter how many good words we heard when we were kids, don't we also still need to hear them and speak them today? And shouldn't we who are followers of Jesus be the ones who are the most likely to offer these blessings?

I was distressed but not too surprised when I read an article in the faith section of yesterday's *Standard Examiner*. The headline was that people who identify as Christians are more than twice as likely to blame the poor for their economic troubles. According to recent polling, Christian believers are much more quick to condemn the poor as lazy and morally inferior, rather than taking into

consideration the systemic problems of our society and other factors beyond their control that might have stacked the deck against them and put them in a financial predicament. Despite all our Christian preaching and Bible reading about the need to care for the sick, the homeless, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan—in this poll, it was the people who identified as atheists, agnostics, or unreligious who had the most sympathy toward the plight of the poor. Doesn't that seem odd to you? Something's wrong with that picture.

The Gospel of Matthew is organized with five major sections of Jesus' teaching. The Sermon on the Mount is the first one of those. And the Sermon on the Mount begins not with words of blame or condemnation. Jesus' first major teaching in this gospel begins with words of encouragement to those who are having a hard time in life. Jesus sees them struggling and he offers them a word of hope. There will be time for corrective teaching later on, for those who are up to that. But right now, at the start, Jesus' good word begins with a blessing. Hopefully, ours will too.

CONCLUSION

My husband Steve and I have been watching a television series about an extended family that lives in the sugarcane-plantation culture of Louisiana. One of the families has a little boy who likes to play with a Barbie-type doll he calls Kenya. One evening, the family was eating in a restaurant, and the little boy had his doll Kenya with him. The male waiter made some off-hand derogatory remark about the boy playing with a doll. As a way to counteract the waiter's disrespect toward his son, the father ordered two ice cream sundaes, one for his son and one for his doll.

Blessings can be spoken in many different ways and in many different situations. But a good word definitely begins with a blessing.