

Something amazing has been happening in our Monday afternoon Bible Study. From September 1st through January 15th, we read 1-4 Chapters of Genesis a week. After each, we asked the question “What did you hear?” and talked about that Chapter, you do not have to speak up, but often times talking about real circumstances in our lives. What this often leads to is questioning not only what did I hear in the Bible passage, but personally questioning “What do I believe?” And those involved have commented “Ever since Sunday School, we have been read the curriculum, told what to believe, but we have never before been able to ask real questions, to talk about life in connection with the Bible, or had to struggle with what we personally thought or believed.” I do not think I have ever had a finer compliment. Thank you to those who have shared and for those who would like to join us, we are now at Exodus 5.

I would like to let you in on a secret. Recently in a Devotional, someone said: “Craig would you read, you pronounce the Hebrew Names so much better.” When those of us going to Theological Seminary want to become Presbyterian Pastors, having already taken languages in High School and College, we have to take Hebrew and Greek, to develop both knowledge to translate and interpret from the original languages of the Old and New Testaments, and to be able to pronounce appropriately. Our Hebrew Professor was George Landes, who had literally written the Textbook every Seminary used for over 40 years. When we finished the introductory class in Hebrew, Professor Landes conferred: “Congratulations, you now possess the knowledge of a 12 year-old child at their Bar Mitzvah!” Except, when I had gone to his office for the Oral Exam, he had shaken his head and stated “Mr. Lindsey, your pronunciation is atrocious, if you will assure me you will not pursue Hebrew for a Doctorate, I will allow you to pass!” But after being Ordained and serving as a pastor for a dozen years, I met a parishioner who had grown up Orthodox Jewish. And being in regular conversation with him about the Bible, faith issues and the church, I learned how to speak.

I think inviting people to think about their real circumstances and faith is what is happening in Matthew 5’s Sermon on the Mount. According to Matthew, Jesus was born, Baptized at age 30 by John the Baptist, called disciples and healed suffering, when he goes to the Mountain to preach. Ironically, one of the things we learn by actually going to Israel, is that rather than going to the Top of the mountain to sit down and preach over the hillside, the hill where this sermon took place is a cliff with a natural bandshell shape and the sea at his back for sound to project as people sat on the hillside.

Many preachers begin a sermon, particularly for an audience they do not know with a Joke or story to put the listeners at ease, wanting to listen more. Jesus begins this sermon with “Blessed are the Poor in Spirit, Blessed are those who Mourn, Blessed are the Meek...” Which if you have known Unemployment, for those who have experienced times of being Spiritually Empty and Wounded, when you are Mourning someone you love, WOULD make your ears prick up; wanting to hear where the devil this preacher is going with this, because there is little about any of those realities that feels like any kind of a blessing! Our culture has perhaps put advertising on steroids, but the Greeks and Romans through the current time have not blessed being MEEK, we affirm the Self-Sufficient, the STRONG, the WEALTHY and SUCCESSFUL. But that reaction from listeners is exactly what the Sermon was setting up, because Jesus was going to claim in clear and certain terms What the Kingdom of God is all about. A challenge to become the SALT of the Earth and LIGHT to the World, challenging what it really means to live in response to GOD’s Desires for us.

This passage is dear to my heart, because first, it was the Scriptural basis for my Doctoral thesis. You are the SALT of the WORLD. In the ancient world Salt was as precious as Money, in fact the word SALARY comes from the word SALT. Before refrigeration, Salt was used as a preservative. Salt was used as means of dehydration. Salt could be used to cauterize a wound. When we lived in Northern climates, salt was used to melt ice and snow. AND JESUS then asks, “But if Salt has lost it’s Saltness, how can it be restored?”

What I came to recognize in the Thesis, is that SALT is also a means of Seasoning, SALT makes your tastebuds salivate, another word for that is to SAVOR, and how close a word SAVOR is to SAVIOR. So if we, THE CHURCH have lost our SAVOR, literally lost our sense of their being a SAVIOR, what good is it?

Second, because in all candor, as a pastor, I had had 35 years of incredible successes. When suddenly, I had the world pulled out from under. In truth when I came to you, I was very wounded and broken. My first several months of sermons, tested your boundaries for what was safe. It was only because of competency and faith in God that we could cope. Thank you for your support and love. But pastoring you, has been a healing for me. Blessed are those who are wounded for they shall be healed.

I have a friend named Lillian Daniel, who is a Pastor, who describes having a FEAR OF PUBLIC SPEAKING. Not that she is afraid of speaking in front of an audience, she is a Radio Talk-show host, and as a pastor had no fear of Lecturing about theology or about God, preaching a sermon or reading Scripture...

“NO, Lillian’s greatest fear was being asked about what she believed. The pressure of having someone look you in the eye, as you realize you have never before really had to think about what you believe, and you freeze.” We can recite the Lord’s Prayer, we can say the Apostles’ Creed, but what do you really believe about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit? She discovered when she asked people in the church to tell a story from when they wrestled with their faith, when they were POOR IN SPIRIT, when they WERE MOURNING, those were often occasions when they found God for real, and different from they had ever heard before.

20th Century German-American Theologian Karl Barth described those encounters as being like: A PRISONER WHO RECEIVES A PARDON. They are free, but until that person gets up and walks out the doors, that person is still a prisoner.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes it is like knowing there is a Check in the next room with your name on it, and that check is for \$1,000,000. The check is yours, you are a Millionaire. But until you claim it and cash it, you are as poor as if it never existed.

Years ago, I had a 16 year old in church, who along with friends got drunk, got into his father’s Ferrari and when the car hit 110, he flipped it over, killing his best friend, leaving a second friend quadriplegic, and he walked away unharmed. He went to Federal Prison for DWI Manslaughter as a 17 year old, and we made certain the church never forgot him. But when he was finally released, we began work, because there is “serving a Sentence of Incarceration”, and REDEMPTION is a whole other matter.

In his book, The Power of One, James Merrell suggests that the Beatitudes may be more instructional if we invert them, reading each backwards.

The way to Heaven is through Poverty of Spirit...

The way to Consolation is through Sorrow...

The way to Reward is through a Gentle Spirit that is neither stingy nor possessive...

The way to satisfaction is through a Hunger and Thirsting for Justice...

The way to Mercy is through Mercy...

The way to God is through an Open, UnObstructed, pure Heart...

The way to a Full relationship with God is through active PEACE...

The way to God’s Kingdom is thru a struggle for Righteousness, that leads thru Conflict, Pain, even Death. Taken this way, the Beatitudes become something of a Roadmap for Life, rather than a Recipe for Success. The world offers a 1,000 self-help formula for Winning, the Beatitudes offer Jesus’ Guide to contentment with God.