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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
February 12, 2023, The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 119:1-8, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

We continue today with the great words of our Lord Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. Two weeks ago, Pastor Greg Fryer invited us to imagine ourselves seated on that hillside along with the disciples listening to Jesus as he preaches to us. As you may remember, Jesus started the sermon with words of blessing:

³Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

And so on. Our Lord begins with gracious words of blessing for those who do not necessarily feel blessed. I daresay we all feel that way sometimes, and often for good reasons. Things are not going our way; we have fallen on hard times; troubles and worries keep us awake at night. If so, then we are precisely the ones to whom Jesus is speaking.

The poor in spirit are those who are downhearted, feeling discouraged, hopeless, and forlorn. And yet, Jesus declares that they are blessed – happy – for they are destined for the kingdom of heaven. Such good news may be hard for the poor in spirit to take in – hard for them to believe – but the Word of the Lord Jesus has power – creative power. And so, the beautiful beatitudes carry that creative power. What Jesus says will be, for there is nothing that can prevent the Divine Word from coming true.

Last Sunday, Vicar Lara told us that the next section of the Sermon is all about our true identity as children of God. Each and every one of us, baptized in the Triune Name, are the salt and light of the world, Jesus says. We are to shine with the light of Christ in the darkness of this world. We are made for good works that bring glory to God. That is our primary identity as the people of God, disciples of Jesus.

So, Jesus has set the stage for the rest of the sermon by declaring us blessed and by establishing our identity as His ambassadors of salt and light in the world. Now we move on to the matter of our relationships with one another. We have come to hear some words that may well make us squirm, at least a little bit, for we know only too well that we do not always get along with each

other as we ought! Today's part of the Sermon is about how we, as Jesus's disciples, ought to live together. And indeed we ought to live together, in community, for that is how our Maker has created us.

Let me take you back to Genesis – to the creation story.

In Genesis chapter 2, we read:

The Lord God formed the man out of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. *(Genesis 2:7)*

After placing the man in the garden and giving him instructions about caring for it and what he could eat or not eat, we read further:

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."
(Genesis 2:18)

So the Lord forms the beasts and the birds and every creature on earth, but none of them were a helper fit for him. And so the Lord causes the man to fall asleep and he takes a rib out of the man and makes a woman. The man wakes up and sees the woman and says:

This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man.
(Genesis 2:23)

From the moment of creation, we are meant to live in community, even if it is just a community of two – husband and wife. God made us to be together, to need each other, to find our meaning and purpose in relationships and in community. Therefore, our Lord opposes anything that destroys relationships and community.

The creation story in chapter 1 of Genesis tells us that we are created – male and female – in the very image of God who is triune – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God Himself is a community of three persons, related to each other in love. Just so, we too are created in that image – to be in community with one another reflecting the loving relationships of the Trinity.

The ten commandments are built on this foundation – the foundation of loving community. I'm sure you remember from your catechism days that the first three commandments have to do with our relationship with God. The

rest of the commandments pertain to our relationships with one another beginning with this one: Honor your father and mother. After that we have “You shall not murder” and “you shall not commit adultery.”

Why does “Honor your father and mother” come first? Because the most fundamental community is the family. It is the building block of human society. All other human institutions exist to support the family –government, police, schools, and even churches. God intends for it to be so from the very beginning and that is why we are created, male and female – fit helpers for one another – that we may be fruitful and multiply! Our Lord has so created us that we might raise up children, generation by generation, to be His faithful people as well as loving and contributing members of the community. This is the primary job of the family, along with the help of the church, schools, and other institutions that keep the peace and make it possible for us to flourish.

I heard a statistic last week that startled me. This was in the context of the various influences on children in today’s world. On average, the amount of time fathers spend with their children is 30 minutes a week. In contrast, the amount of time children spend on social media is 30 hours a week. Something has truly gone awry in our society. The question is, who is really raising our children? What has happened to the family as the foundation of community?

And so, today’s section of the Sermon on the Mount is all about how we live in community. We must use our sacred imagination to imagine what it will be like to live together in the kingdom over which Jesus reigns. Jesus came into this world proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven is at hand – it has arrived and is here now because Jesus is here! He is present among us! And there are certain things – behaviors and choices – that do not belong in that kingdom. They do not fit. Some of the things that we say and do just do not fit in because they destroy relationships – they tear apart the community – the koinonia. These are the things that Jesus addresses in this part of the Sermon.

Three things that do not belong in the kingdom of heaven are addressed here: angry words and deeds; lust and adultery; and not telling the truth. All these things are destructive of human community and so Jesus forbids them! He does not mince words! He knows how harmful they are. Human history is full of such things, going all the way back to Adam and Eve lying to God about the apple; to Cain killing Abel; to Jacob cheating his brother Esau; Potiphar’s wife seducing Joseph. I could go on and on, but you know what I mean. We see it all around us. Relationships and community are destroyed by angry words and deeds, by unfaithfulness in marriage, and by failures in telling the truth.

And yet it is our Lord’s desire that His people live together in peace and

harmony! We are to be one people, united in love and faith. We know Jesus's great prayer in John's gospel from the night before he suffered and died for us. It is called the High Priestly prayer. Jesus prayed earnestly that his followers might be one, just as He and the Father are one – perfectly united in love and in purpose, and in singleness of heart.

Jesus prayed for his disciples in these words:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (*John 17:20-21*)

Our unity, or rather our lack of it, affects our witness to Christ! This is not pleasing to our Lord, and we must not only seek His forgiveness but also try to do better.

The importance of human community is the basis of all the commandments in the second table of the law. In our reading today, Jesus addresses the commandments having to do with murder, adultery and swearing falsely – bearing false witness, or in other words, lying. He is not dismissing the commandments – far from it. Rather, he is expanding and developing them by saying that being angry and insulting your brother or sister is just as bad as killing them. We can have angry feelings, but our Lord wants us to not allow those feelings to become destructive of our relationships.

Then He says that looking at someone, who is not your spouse, with lust in your eyes or in your thoughts is as bad as committing adultery. We may have lustful feelings but, again, we should not allow those feelings to harm anyone.

Third, we should always be men and women and children of truth, never using an oath of any kind to prop up a lie. Let us be people of truth, entirely trustworthy, so that others may know that they can count on us to be true to our word.

If all this sounds difficult or nearly impossible, I encourage you to go back to that sacred imagination and think about this. Jesus is Lord of all. He reigns now over heaven and earth. We are His people, striving to live according to His will and His ways as best we can. Imagine what our world would be like if we could actually do that! Imagine a world in which all the commandments of God were obeyed perfectly by everyone! Imagine a community of love in which nothing was said or done out of anger. Disputes are handled with

charity, compassion, and humility. Sexual harassment or exploitation does not exist. Husbands and wives truly enjoy each other as one flesh. Children are loved and cared for and never considered a burden. Relationships are built on trust because everyone is trustworthy. Wouldn't you want to be part of that world?

That's what I believe Jesus is getting at in the Sermon on the Mount. He is saying, when you follow me, this is where we are going. This is what my kingdom is like, will be like when all my enemies are finally defeated. Let us strive, with the help of God, to live this way now, for the sake of our families, our children, our community, and our world – following our Lord Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen