**The Power of a Huddle**

Message #2 in the series, “Blessed (for Chaos)”

Matthew 5:1-2

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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***46****While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him.****47****Someone told him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”****48****But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”****49****And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers!****50****For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”* ***(Matthew 12:46-50)***

I still get a jolt of energy on the first day of school. This year marks the end of my 18th year as a teacher. While the last day of school is simply remarkable, when that final class lets out for the semester, and that all familiar wave of exhilaration and accomplishment sweeps over every soul running full speed toward summer vacation, it is the first day of school that I look forward to most.

The first day of school is like a teacher’s second new year celebration. It’s a time of new beginnings and new commitments, new horizons and new possibilities. Every teacher, just like every student, is starting over again. Everyone has the opportunity to be better than they were the previous year. Everyone has a chance to cut new ground, and if you are teacher, I think you know what I am talking about today. There is very little that compares to the feeling you get to experience every year. This renewed newness. It is one of the true gifts of dedicating one’s life to education—a gift that comes every single year.

My first job in teaching was at Maize South Middle School. I’ve shared some of my experiences with you from this first job I had after college. The very first day is a day I will never forget. It was the actualization of years of hard work and dedication. I had made it. I was now a classroom teacher.

On that fateful day, as my students filtered in one and two at a time for first period, I began to hand out nametags and all the forms students receive on the first day. I was making my way around the room to collect the textbook sign out cards when a seventh grader seated in the front row leaned over from his desk and threw up his entire breakfast on to the floor and on my shoes. In that moment, just minutes after the first day of school began, I thought to myself, “I didn’t sign up for this…”

It just hit me that Pastor David started his message last week with a story about sea sickness. I am seeing a trend here.

As we continue to lean into the Easter season, the season we celebrate the remarkable resurrection of Jesus Christ, we celebrate the rebirth he authors inside each of us. We celebrate this remarkable blessing that through Christ our sins are forgiven and we can live freely, sharing the love, peace and hope that comes through our salvation with rest of the world. And have you seen the world lately? More love, peace and hope could go a long way, amen? The world needs Jesus. The world needs you.

In our current sermon series called “Blessed for Chaos” we are looking at how we are in fact equipped for such a time as this. God has formed us and shaped us to be a blessing to others no matter how crazy and chaotic everything else might be. No matter what challenges we face individually, no matter what may be unfolding in our neighborhoods, towns, state or country, God has placed us here, now and put us in community with one another on purpose.

Last week we examined who God calls and who he tends to use for his mission here on Earth. As Pastor David shared last week, all of us here today or interacting with our worship services online, no matter where you are seated in the room today or if you listening to this message while driving your car, you, yes all of us, have said “Yes” at one point or another to God and have entered into a relationship with him.

**And who are we?**

We are redeemed children of God. We were once condemned by our sins, but we have been made free from the death of sin by the blood of Jesus Christ. And we are called to be a disciple. And we are called to invite others on this journey—in pursuit of God’s mission—to heal all creation of the brokeness found in our world. Yes. The world needs healing. The world needs you. Maybe we have forgotten how to be disciple, or maybe we’ve never learned how to disciple. So, before you begin to panic and ask yourself, “Is this what I signed up for?” Let’s unpack today ***how*** Jesus called his disciples to the mountain to be taught and ***what*** their relationship was meant to be. **Why?** Because in doing so, I believe we’ll see how we might orient ourselves to God’s calling on us. Knowing our role gives us clarity for the task at hand.

For the next several weeks, we are going to focus on a specific slice of scripture in Matthew 5 titled “The Beatitudes.” A very important lesson meant for a specific group of people that miraculously speaks clarity and truth to us even today. What are the Beatitudes? They are the very character of those who are disciples. This lesson begins with a specific venue and a specific word choice. Let’s start at the beginning in Matthew 5 to see what we can find.

*1When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them…***(Matthew 5:1-2)**

For just a bit of context, let’s back up the tape just a couple of verses. If you look back at the end of Matthew 4, you’ll see that Jesus is becoming wildly popular. It says that throughout Syria, people had heard of this remarkable healer named Jesus. Many had seen him heal the sick and heard him preach. As a result, crowds of people were flocking to wherever Jesus was. So it is notable that in verse 1 of chapter 5 it says that when Jesus “saw the crowds, he went up the mountain.”

**Why did he go to the mountain?**

It seems to me that if Jesus was looking to start a momentous transformational movement that would change the entire course of history forever, the conventional path would be to turn to the crowds and appeal to as many people as possible at a single moment. That seems like the most efficient way to launch a world-wide ministry to me: convince as many people as possible in a single moment. I mean, that is how we might go about it today, right? Everything from our news and entertainment to our sports and hobbies—everything seems to be socially motivated. And really I mean social-media motivated. If I get the right picture, capture the right video, string together the right words or number of characters in a tweet or post, my latest social media update will go viral. Which if I am being honest, after 2020 “viral” doesn’t sound like a good thing anymore, amen? We may need to find a different term for wildly popular content.

But that’s our bias. We want to go big. In fact we have a saying that suggests you either **“Go big or go home!”** When we think we have something really important say, we want as many people as possible to hear it. But that isn’t what Jesus does. The text says that when he saw the crowds he turned and left the crowds to go up a mountain, and his disciples followed him. In delivering this important message about what it means to be a believer and follower, to be on mission for God in the world he created, Jesus leaves the big crowds draws in the small group of 12 of his closest friends. In doing so, he moves from the horde to form a huddle. He could have taught the lesson of the Beatitudes to the mass of people who had gathered—including the disciples in his audience. But instead, to teach this lesson, to start a world-wide movement, to go big, Jesus went small. He poured his wisdom and guidance into a small group of people he called “disciples.”

How did this movement begin? It began with a small group of people.

The text for today says that as Jesus went up to the mountain, he sat down and his disciples came to him. The significance of every single word in this scripture is telling. Matthew took the opportunity to explain that Jesus sat down. Preachers love to point this out in the scripture because in Jesus’s time the teacher or preacher would sit and those listening to him would stand around him. How different it is today. No matter if you are in a classroom or a church sanctuary the speaker, teacher or preacher is the one standing and those listening are sitting. Significant still is the posture Jesus takes as a teacher. His small audience, you see, are disciples. What are disciples? The word used in scripture when read in the original Greek is “mathetes” (mu-THAY-tes). It derives from the word “manthano” it is where we get our word “mathematics” in English. “Disciple” literally means “learner” or “one who learns from another or from an endeavor.” You see, most significantly here in this illustration is you can’t have a disciple without a teacher. One can not exist without the other. A teacher without students is just a know-it-all talking to an empty room. And while this word choice, the use of the word “disciple” is important for us to understand who these 12 guys around Jesus are, it is also telling of who Jesus is. He’s a teacher.

And so, as the text says, as Jesus, the teacher, sat down and gathered his disciples, those now on a life-long journey of learning, he began to speak, and teach them.

The Bible has a great deal to say about what a disciple is in context to one’s relationship with God. To be a follower of Jesus Christ, to be a disciple on mission for God the Father here on Earth, means that you have embarked on a journey, and it is a remarkable journey.

**Disciples of Christ are always learning**.

To be a disciple is to enter into the very same life of learning on which Jesus’s original disciples would have ventured. Our teacher is always guiding us and preparing us for the next stage of life. He’s equipping us and shaping us for the remarkable work ahead. And while we will learn throughout life’s many, many lessons, the learning never ends. One specific example of this sentiment is found a little later in chapter 23 of Matthew’s gospel. When speaking to his disciples about the Pharisees and other religious leaders of the day, Jesus says in verse 8

*But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are*

*all students.* **(Matthew 23:8)**

There is that symbiotic relationship again—teacher and students. What Jesus is saying in 23:8 challenges the model of training a religious leader would have had at the time. A young boy would typically enter into an apprenticeship with a rabbi and learn the job over time until one day he would assume that role—a role that he chose or that someone had chosen for him. In the case of a disciples, their dynamic was a little different. Jesus had chosen them. All of the disciples had professions they held prior to becoming a disciple and joining Jesus in his ministry. They were fishermen, bookkeepers and physicians. They came from all walks of life and by all accounts were rather ordinary guys. The text however is quite clear. Disciples are life-long learners. There are no graduates because the learning never stops. The teacher never stops teaching and the opportunity to learn for the students never ends.

**Disciples are called to serve.**

From Jesus’s teaching we have what we refer to as the great commission: to share the word of God, to share the story of Jesus’s great sacrificial love, and to baptize new believers all over the world in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are called, in effect to disciple disciples. In calling disciples to service, Jesus doesn’t hold anything back. We serve a remarkable teacher who will always engage us in the things we need to know, and at the appointed time, he makes every preparation and trusts us with the work at hand. In everything, everything we learn, we are called to serve. And when a disciple serves, when or she leans into the calling God has placed on his or her life and embraces the role of disciple—one who is always learning—we do so with the very authority of Christ. When talking to Peter, one of the original 12 disciples, Jesus says,

*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”***(Matthew 16:19)**

I mean check this out. Disciples, always the students, have the authority of Christ on Earth. That is a remarkable responsibility. The very keys to the Kingdom of God have been handed to us.

When I was a senior in high school I’ll never forget the day I was called to the office. Friends, I wasn’t a perfect kid in high school, but I never, ever got called to the office. So this day was really memorable. Not entirely sure why the secretary had called my name to report to the office, I can remember sitting in the lobby area. My leg was bouncing up and down as my anxiety began to grow as the minutes ticked away. I ran through everything I had done that day, every interaction with a teacher, everything I would have said during passing periods. I was a nervous wreck. As I was trying to figure out what I had done my anxiety ratcheted up several more levels when the secretary said, “Principal Blazek will see you now.”

While in high school, I served as a technical director for the high school and middle school auditoriums. I maintained the lighting and sound systems in each venue and this side-job had become something of a regular part-time job as more and more groups wanted to use these spaces for concerts and programs. I was spending nearly every evening at the school. It turns out that my visit to the principal’s office that day was related to this work.

As I sat down in Mr. Blazek’s office, my high school principal handed me a brass colored key. The letters stamped on the key were MA01. He handed me, a high school senior, a master key to the entire school. I was speechless. All Mr. Blazek said was, “I have never given a student a master key to the school. Understand the responsibility you now have. Don’t let me down.” I so appreciated the honor of holding that key for Mr. Blazek. Yes, it came in handy when I needed access to the building in order to my job. But it meant so much more. It meant he trusted me.

God is calling us to him. When we say, “Yes” to him and take on the role of disciple, to learn and to be taught by the teacher, we are given the master key. The authority and trust of the Kingdom of God.

**Disciples are bound to God’s will**

Earlier in this service, we heard a reading from Matthew 12:46-50 in which Jesus explains how, in the Kingdom of God, we are all related. He looked at his disciples and said “who is my family? You are my family.”

Just as one is bound to his or her mother and siblings, so too a disciple is bound to the will of God. You can not separate from your family, though you might have a strong case following a year of on-again-off-again lockdowns and home confinement. No matter the distance between you and your immediate family, you are bound to one another.

 I have four siblings and we all live in different states. I have a brother who lives in Massachusetts and another brother who lives in Kansas. I have a sister that lives in California and another that lives in Illinois, and while great distance separates us, no amount of distance will ever divide us. Think of that. Though we have never seen God and we weren’t alive to see Jesus is person, those of who believe he is the son of God and confess with our lips God raised him from the dead, will be saved. We are bound to God’s will just we are bound to immediate family. And through this common bond we share in God’s will, we are bound to one another.

**Why**

Jesus went up to the mountain. Gathered a small group of close friends together to share what we will come to learn in the weeks ahead are the Beatitudes—the very character of those called into discipleship. These characteristics will be the topics of our sermon discussions for the weeks to come. Jesus could have shared this wisdom with the large group. We don’t know the size of the crowd that was gathering, but he had to be massive. Instead, he turned to the people he had selected and taught them. He didn’t lecture or cajole. He didn’t bargain or beg. He didn’t command or dictate. He didn’t mandate or recommend. He taught. Building into his disciples the wisdom and offering an invitation to join him for the most amazing journey. One that would be filled with revelation, heartbreak and back again.

What these first two verses in Matthew 5 also reveal to us is that we don’t have to go big. I think when we first consider what it means to be in service to others, we begin to feel overwhelmed. There is so much pain, so much emptiness, so much brokenness… How could I ever make a difference in this wide and wild world? We might even ask ourselves, “Did I sign up for this?” We’re thinking big when we should, like Jesus, think small. Who in your immediate circle could use encouragement? Who in your daily rhythm is someone you’ve been praying for who you sense might be ready to receive an invitation to church? Who in your social media feed or mobile phone contacts list could use a kind word of encouragement or inspiration that you could send right now?

For those who might hesitate at the notion of stepping forward, to stand in the gap, and serve, to be a disciple, I have one more question for you. What might you learn by encouraging, supporting and inviting others today?

We’re on a journey friends—a journey where the learning never, ever ends. Our discipleship continues today.