

2020-08-22 Mt 5:14-16 Embody God's Truth

Title: **BLESS – Embody God's Truth**

When we began this series on Spiritual Conversations as a refreshing and fun way to reimagine evangelism, I shared this bit of data from Dr. Richard Pease at Fuller Seminary:

The average person comes to faith hears the gospel 9 times, by 5 people, over 2 years.

I don't know about you, but I breathe a sigh of relief when I think of this. I don't have to "close the deal." But I can be one of those 5 people who invites people into spiritual conversations and who asks provocative questions born out of genuine care, curiosity, and compassion. This is something we call all do.

Our text this morning is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and it is his description of who we ALL are called to be, and what we can ALL do as participants in the Good Life, as revealers of God's reign. Jesus' vision for us is so beautiful, so brave, and so big that it sort of takes my breath away every time I read it.

Text:

Matt 5:14-16 NRSV

14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Maybe the most amazing thing about this passage are the first two words: YOU ARE. Not, "you could be if you tried harder" or "you might be if you were a better person" or "you ought to be so clean up your act." This is who you ARE! So Jesus' command is:

Let yourself be who you are already are!

Isn't it great to know that you are enough? That you don't have to know more, or be better or different than you are? You are enough. Just be you. Out loud. Out in the open, in front of the whole world. Be the person God is creating you to be even as you remember that this work is still underway.

When it comes to being your most authentic self, I think of three expressions. It is in these three expressions of ourselves that we can do the "E" in our acronym BLESS – "Embody God's Truth."

We express our truest selves in:

- **What we love to do**
- **What breaks our hearts**
- **Where we struggle and have doubts**

This is true for us as individuals, but it's also true for us in our families and together as a faith community.

What we love to do

My friend Chris loves disc golf. He loves it so much he spent years working with city governments and regional parks to build disc golf courses in unused and under-used park spaces. A whole community of disc golf lovers came together to build and maintain the courses. Chris is a Christian. Chris loves Jesus most of all. But when how, in love, he has helped create these fun spaces that thousands of people enjoy together and become community together, all I can think is: Jesus is in this!

I think everyone moved through life thinking, "I'm the only person who loves this, I'm a weirdo." We all love things that other people think is weird or least not worthy being loved as much as we love it.

But then the internet came along and we found out that we are ALL weirdos. There is a Facebook page or a Meetup group for absolutely everything. One of the saddest and strangest things to me is the way we Christians live double-lives, separating our "church life" from the other things we love – keeping them separate and even in competition with each other. After all, there is only one Sunday a week so if it's football season then something's gotta give, right? Even worse, we are afraid people at church would think less of us if they knew how much we love cosplay or tattoo art or whiskey tasting or reptiles or stock cars or horror movies.

Even if you don't love those things, can you love someone who loves them? And can we be open to the possibility that God wants to use the things we love for God's glory?

What breaks our hearts

My friend Karen is very active with Harbor House, an ministry to kids and their families in the heart of Oakland. The kids come from dozens of different countries and they lives as part of immigrant families are precarious, to put it mildly. When asked why she is so invested in this ministry she simply says, "This is the thing that breaks my heart just like it breaks God's heart."

Whatever breaks your heart, it breaks the heart of other people too. That shared broken-heartedness can the place where being salt, light, and a city and a hill is most needed.

Where we struggle and have doubts

If it is hard to believe our doubts and our struggles are good contexts for evangelism, then that is because we have had the wrong idea about evangelism. For too long we have thought we are supposed to have our faith squared-away and buttoned down before we share it with someone else. We have bought into the lie that we are supposed to have all the answers. But we know the opposite is true! Jesus implies as much with his message to this crowd gathered around the base of a mountain. It's not like any of them had it all figured out. And yet Jesus declares that who you are, right now, is enough to be salt, light, and a city on a hill.

For many people, the three hardest words to say are "I don't know." But acknowledging what we don't know is a huge part of telling the truth. What if a major reason people don't find Christianity credible is because Christians aren't honest about what a mixed-bag of love and fear, certainty and doubt, faith and unbelief we are? When we are vulnerable in our honesty, it gives permission for others to be vulnerable too. When we find common ground in the beautiful questions, then we trust Jesus to reveal himself as the answer – not a set of doctrines, but a real person ready to meet us just as he met those first sheep-without-a-shepherd folks.

Embodying God's Truth as the Church Together

Our loves, our heartbreaks, and our doubts are the best places to Embody God's Truth as individuals. But what about for us collectively, as the church? When it comes to Embodying God's Truth as a faith community, the real question is: When should we be inviting other people to join us in what we love, in what breaks our hearts, and in wrestling with our struggles? In his book *Reimagining Evangelism*, Rick Richardson reflects on what "The Witness of the Community" looks like. He reminds us of what Jesus says in John 13:35 – "They will know you are my disciples by the way you love each other."

So when should we invite our friends to church? It's not as straight-forward a question as it seems.

There are great programs or events that have go-to entry points to our church community: Alpha, marriage enrichment, Day Camp, Christmas brunches, MOPs. These are great programs as long as we remember that they are a means to an end, and the end is NOT to get more church members! The end is LOVE EACH OTHER well and invite others into that circle of love!

The other expression of love is responding to what breaks our hearts, so ministries that that serve the poor and work for justice and reconciliation are also great entry points.

Here's the secret that successful church planters know: When you want to draw people into church, invite them to ANYTHING but church! My church planting friends will spend months – even years – connecting with people in the community around local schools, recreation, neighborhood events, and even community service projects before inviting them to be part of worshipping community.

A couple years ago at the ECO National Gathering a pastor shared how they began a thriving church community not in a sanctuary or a school gymnasium but on the sidelines of the soccer field. The pastor would bring a grill and – rain or shine – have hot dogs ready for the kids after the game. From there conversations with parents started, and things took off from there.

In the last few months I've gotten to take some great on-line seminars with a parachurch ministry called Fresh Expressions, which helps church leaders imagine innovative ways of doing church with their people and for the greater community. From them I've heard about things like "bike trail church," which are really just very intentional ways that Christians are doing what they love in a way that places friendships, spiritual conversations, and the gospel at the center. One pastor Michael Beck serves a church that meets every Sunday, and one Sunday the celebrated the baptism of "Jason," who had come to Christ what Beck called – "gym church." Gym Church wasn't church at all – at least not in the traditional sense - but it was the place where Jason made friends, heard stories about Jesus, and learned how to pray. When came on a Sunday morning to be baptized he had been discipled and been a part of a faith community for months but had never been inside the church before! Can we imagine church flourishing outside our walls like that?

When it comes to Embodying the Truth of the gospel, it is probably better to start with questions instead of answers. Questions like:

- What do we love doing together?
- What breaks our hearts – or – even better, what breaks the hearts of those people in our community that we really want to reach?
- Can we be honest about our doubts, and make it okay for others to have express doubts too?

And perhaps the most important question of all: **Jesus, where are you already at work?**

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, show us where you are already at work.

We want to know: Is there someone you want me to talk to, care for or pray with?

Is there someone who is hurting?

Lead us to them, we pray. Amen.