

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 20, 2022

Spoken Into Existence

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christina and I have a long running argument...well, it's more of a discussion at this point. I don't remember exactly how it started, but I do know it started in college and we have returned to it off and on throughout our life together since. The basis of the argument is this: I suggested that there's really no such thing as objective truth because all of reality must be interpreted by the individual; Christina argues that there absolutely is such a thing as objective truth, and she points to things like math and science to prove it.

All in all, it's a fun discussion to have, we wouldn't have kept it going for so long if it weren't. It's even got some excellent opportunities for circular reasoning, which can lead to some amusing conversations! And in the end, we both recognize the merits of the other's perspective, so it's all in good fun and it also serves us well as a reminder of the pointlessness of some arguments.

Now, I do actually believe in my argument about there being no such thing as objective truth; but I'll add a caveat to that...when it comes to human beings there is no such thing as objective truth. Why? Well, because every piece of information we take in comes to us through multiple lenses. Most of those lenses being largely defined by culture and language.

The linguistic philosopher, Hans Gadamer, called the combination of these lenses our "horizon of understanding."¹ In the end, we are limited in our ability to interpret reality by our horizons, by the various lenses we have – culture, language, experiences, education, values, ideologies, even our egos. Horizons can be large, or small, but they are never all-

¹ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*, p. 396. New York: Continuum, 1994.

encompassing. There is always something for us to miss or filter out because we don't know what to make of it.

If nothing else, I hope you can take away from this the utter importance of understanding our lenses, or our horizon of understanding, if that phrase works better for you. It is important to understand this because how we interpret the world around us greatly affects how we operate within the world. It affects how we treat the people around us, it even affects how we view ourselves and our relationship to the world. There is, perhaps, no greater understanding that we can seek than to understand how the way we think impacts our experience of reality (hence my argument against objective truth, at least when it comes to the human ability to see it).

This self-understanding is key if we truly want to live out the Way of Jesus Christ. There are a variety of reasons for this, not the least of which is that self-understanding tends to lead to greater compassion towards others. But the reason I want to lift up today is the reason Christ gives in Luke's Gospel. Followers of the Way of Christ are to be people of blessing. And to be people of blessing we have to start with some level of self-awareness and self-understanding because the act of blessing someone requires authenticity and humility.

The word "blessing" in the Greek is a construct of two smaller Greek words, "εὖ" and "λογέω" which mean "good" and "word" respectively. So, to bless someone is to literally speak good words onto them, or to "confer benefit"² as my concordance defines it. The very act of blessing starts with our ability to desire good for the person we are blessing. We have to earnestly want what we are saying to someone else. Now, consider who Jesus is asking his followers to bless in this portion of the sermon: your enemies.

Now we begin to see how utterly radical this teaching is. In order to live out my faith, in order to walk the Way of Christ, not only am I to love my enemies and do good to those who hate me; but I am to earnestly desire good for them. I can't just play act at civility with my enemies, I must really mean it. And it goes to follow that if I am to earnestly desire good for someone, I should act in such a way that I will contribute to the goodness they receive. Actions flow from words and words inspire our actions.

² Strong, J. *Strong's exhaustive concordance of the Bible*, #2127. Hendrickson Publishers, 2009.

This teaching absolutely makes sense if our goal is a kingdom where all are known, accepted, and loved, a kingdom where peace, justice, and mercy rule over any other concerns. But in the world of our reality, this teaching seems very foreign. Our reality teaches (and has taught since long before Christ) that we should destroy our enemies, or at the very least, make them uncomfortable and ashamed. Our reality teaches that personal freedom is of vastly greater importance than the common good. And what greater personal freedom is there than my freedom to be mean to others? We see stories all the time of people harassing store clerks or restaurant servers. That is the opposite of blessing.

As I pointed out last week, our reality is severely broken. Our systems are broken, and we have allowed our lenses, our horizons, to define us to the point where we are no longer even interested in other perspectives, let alone in earnestly speaking good on others, or truly blessing them. This is yet another way that the Gospel is truly good news, but also counter-cultural news. The Way of Christ is very foreign to our world. And our world **hates** it. So, to walk it can be a dangerous undertaking, it will make us enemies of the world itself, along with all of the powers and principalities that rule it currently. But hang on a second, I seem to recall a recent teaching by Christ about what to do with enemies...

We will continue to share the words and actions of blessing communally here at St. Stephen, at least as long as I am pastor here. We have been blessed to be a blessing. But being a blessing, speaking good onto others and the world, is something we're not that practiced at, so we need to keep practicing it. We need to approach blessing others and world from a place of deep authenticity and earnestness. As we say those words of blessing, we are called to picture exactly whom we wish would not receive them, and try to speak good onto even them, truly desire good to happen to them, and allow that desire to influence how we treat them, even think of them.

In a very meaningful way, blessing others is an act of humility. It involves setting aside our opinion of someone in favor of an earnest desire for good for them. I wonder what the world would look like if more people were to follow this Way of Christ. What new reality might we help create if we routinely and earnestly spoke good on the people and world around us? Perhaps we might even speak the Kingdom of God into reality, into coming that much sooner. We can only hope!

So, I ask you, my siblings in Christ, what words are you speaking? And do you really mean them? What reality are you speaking into existence? Are you earnestly trying to bless others and the world around you? Are you speaking goodness into reality? Or are you speaking words that only reinforce our current, broken reality? I truly believe that words have the power to shape our reality, how are we using that power? What reality are we speaking into existence? And what would it take to speak the Kingdom of God into existence? Amen.

- Pastor Jon Nelson