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Dear Matthew

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Dear Matthew
A play for actors and singers by John Steven Paul
A play by Soul Purpose based on the Beatitudes
Matthew 5:1-12
Developed in workshop by Soul Purpose,
The liturgical drama troupe of the Valparaiso University Theatre
All Saints, November 3, 2002
Revised April 14, 2003

Cast

Rachel, 34, *a member of the congregation, PhD candidate in clinical psychology, lay minister*
Paul, 40ish, *poor in spirit*
Monica, 80, *a shut-in mourning her independence*
Rick, late 20's, *hungry for righteousness*
Taylor, Rick's sister, late 20's, *merciful*
Gracie, 50, *pure in heart or doing the right thing for the wrong reason*
Joel, 17, *a suffering peacemaker*

i. Rachel

Rachel.

September 29.

Dear Matthew,

Today is my first day. My first Sunday, at least. I actually moved into my office on Friday.

I can't believe how lucky -- *blessed* -- I am. It was unbelievably good of the Department to let me use this lay ministry job as part of my clinical internship. It almost makes up for your being called up. Not really. But at least I'll be busy.

I know we can talk on the phone and do e-mail, but I'd like to try letter-writing. My Mom told me she fell in love with my Dad by reading the letters he wrote to her while he was in the service. She put her heart in the letters she wrote back. OK, dearest, here's my heart. And a little news, too.

The pastor wants me to put in about 30 hours a week counseling, visiting the hospital, and shut-ins, working some with the youth, and until the assistant gets back from his recuperation I'm leading a Bible class too. It's on the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. I should be pretty good at that. I have an affinity for Matthew. Anyway, we start with the Beatitudes today -- You know, "Blessed are they" over and over again about 8 times.

I've worked out my Sunday schedule, partly. Up at 5:00 AM; prayer; write a letter to you; breakfast, dress, and leave for church by 7:30. Oh! Time to go. More soon, Dear Heart. My mother says to tell you, "Don't drink the water." She's so sweet. But maybe you shouldn't. Love...

Paul.

(the time is now Wednesday, late afternoon) Rachel, Rachel, can I talk with you?

Rachel.

Sure Paul. Come in.

ii. Paul, poor in spirit

Rachel. October 6.

Dear Matthew,

I'm so glad I have you to write to. I need to tell you a story, but you'd better burn this letter after you've read it. It's about Paul. He's a doctor, a surgeon, about 40. He came to see me Wednesday I guess people had been asking him...

Paul.

(in the middle of a conversation) ... why I don't go to church. For someone who's always talking about God they seem to think I ought to show it a little more.

Rachel.

They're just concerned about you.

Paul.

They're quite forward about it. The other day, someone I know only casually expressed "her concern" about my church attendance right in the produce aisle of the grocery store!

Rachel.

At the risk of committing the same error...would you like to talk about church?

Paul.

That's why I'm here. Word has it you're a clinical psychologist-in-training and a church-goer. I'm a surgeon suffering a...mild...depression and a...former...church-goer. I thought we might have some things to talk about.

Rachel.

Could be. I'm listening, doctor.

Paul.

Please call me Paul. I'm going through a very hard time. I'm suffering all the usual symptoms. Bad headaches; body aches; I want to sleep more than I need to.

Rachel.

Paul, this doesn't sound like a church problem, this sounds like a medical problem. Are you getting help with this?

Paul.

I've been to a psychologist friend. He prescribed some medicine. But I know now that it's more than medical. It's – what? – spiritual. Something happens -- you don't know what all the time – and the body shuts down. The last time things got really bad, it was being in church that triggered the feelings. I had grown up in the church, spent all kinds of time there, good times. And then, within the course of a very short time it began to feel more and more wrong. Everything that once seemed in line with my thinking – hymns, prayers, sermons, sacraments – felt crosswise. Like a chicken bone caught in my throat. I tried a different church: same phenomenon.

Rachel.

Paul, where's God in this story?

Paul.

I tried to get away from anything connected with the church. It took some time, but I completely disconnected myself from that part of my life – oh, I still talked to God, but not to anyone prepared to give me pat answers out of a little book. Actually, there wasn't any answer at all. I yelled into the air, bounced my voice off the wall. I liked that God was letting me say what I wanted without interruptions. But I wasn't feeling any better.

Rachel.

This was a while ago, you say?.

Paul.

Six years. Then we made peace, God and me. And I joined this church. But now, that strange crosswise feeling is starting again. I don't know if I can bear it. (*pause*) I have to go now. Physician heal thyself, huh?

Rachel.

I don't know about that. Let's stay in touch, Paul, OK?

(*back to the letter*)

Poor Paul; it's like the breath has been squeezed out of him. I've seen him around some times; not in church yet. I try to keep up with him without being intrusive.

The Beatitudes are more interesting than I thought. They've really got me thinking. I'm asking the Bible class to keep a journal based on them. Sort of "How many of *the Blesséd* do you know?" I have a theory on the kingdom of God: it's going to be made up of people who you'd least expect to be in it. How does that sound? I'm not sure that I would have recognized Paul as one of the "poor in spirit," but that seems like just the right description. If you have an idea about this, write me. No letter from you yet.

Love, Rachel.

iii. Monica in mourning

Rachel.

October 13

Dear Matthew,

This is the best season of the year around here. I love being outside in the leaves. Not everyone can be outside. Visiting shut-ins may be the hardest part of this job. Like Monica...

Monica.

I never thought there'd come a fall when I wouldn't have at least a day to be out kicking my feet through the leaves.

Rachel.

Do you feel your hip getting any stronger, Monica?

Monica.

If I did, do you think I'd be keeping myself in this wheelchair? (*catching herself*) Oh, I'm sorry... uh...?

Rachel.

Rachel.

Monica.

Rachel. I'm sorry to snap at you. You're so nice to come and sit in here with me on a beautiful day. I'm just grumpy. You can't imagine.... I knew I'd get old and probably have to depend on other people. I just didn't think it would come this fast.

Rachel.

No. There's no way I can know how you feel. Except I know that time does seem to pass quickly.

Monica.

And so terribly slow on some days. Right after my fall, the days went by like molasses in January.

Rachel.

And that's why you had to miss your grandson's baptism, isn't it.

Monica.

(*with mock indignation; she has a sense of humor*) My great grandson, I'll have you know. And the fourth great grandchild at that!

Rachel.

Excuse me. I'm sure he missed his *great* grandmother being at the church.

Monica.

Of course he didn't. He had no idea what was going on. But I missed being there. Not just because I think it's so important to witness. But because.... Well I've always been able to get everywhere by myself. Never been laid up before. Not until was eighty. I guess eighty's not that old, is it?

Rachel.

Mrs. Paterson, down the hall, is 94.

Monica.

You had to bring her up to me! The old fossil just passed another driver's test. She'll be driving that broken down maroon Buick all over town while I sit here waiting to be picked up and taken to the grocery, and the doctors and everywhere else. That's the bother of it: not being able to do things for myself.

Rachel.

But when you called me at church, you said you had a plan to discuss.

Monica.

Well, maybe. I've got to get over this feeling of mourning.

Rachel.

Did you say "mourning"?

Monica.

That's what I feel like. I feel like someone died and I'm in mourning for them. But I think what I'm mourning is my own life, my life before I took that fall. And, I've got to get over that feeling because I'm not dead yet. Here's my idea. I figure that I have 112 people in my family if you count children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, their husbands and wives (some of 'em are divorced and got second families). Somebody ought to be holding all those people together, I mean being in touch with each other. Don't you think?

Rachel.

And that someone's going to be...

Monica.

Well, why not? Give me something to do.

Rachel.

How will you do it? That's a lot of letters to write on a regular basis. One hundred and twelve, you said.

Monica.

No, I couldn't possibly do that. But, I've been reading and hearing about this thing called the World Wide Web, on the computer.

Rachel.

So, you'll hold them together electronically?

Monica.

No. That doesn't even sound right, does it? Besides I'm too old to start with computers. There I go again. No, I'm going to do it with prayer. The world wide prayer web. I'll pray for them, regularly, on a schedule. That way I'll think about them, talk to God about them and hold them closer than a computer could. What do you think?

iv. Rick, hungry for righteousness and Taylor, the merciful

Rachel.

October 20..

Dear Matthew,

What I think is blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Do you think it's odd that I would be meeting people who seem to have a direct connection to my Sermon on the Mount class? Coincidental? Maybe I'm just paying closer attention. To people like Taylor, I mean.

Taylor.

I was in my room packing up a few last things for the trip back to Valpo. I turned around and saw my brother standing in the doorway.

Rachel.

Had you seen him lately?

Taylor.

Yes. A couple of times over Christmas. Not long times; an hour or two once or twice. But never alone. Not alone; not for years.

Rachel.

What happened?

Taylor.

He handed me some money. Five hundred dollars.

Taylor. *(to RICK)*

What's this?

Rick.

I think you know.

Taylor.

Yes?

Rick.

It's some of the money I've stolen from you over the past...few...years.

Taylor.

I don't really need this money, Rick. Don't you?

Rick.

But when you did need it, it was gone. Wasn't it?

Taylor.

Yes.

Rick.

More than once.

Taylor.

Yes.

Rick.

I've had a job for almost a year. Let me pay you back. I don't know why you never told anybody. Mom and Dad. The police.

Taylor.

Where have you *been*, Rick? I haven't seen you for more than a couple of hours at a time since we were little.

Rick.

That's because I haven't wanted you to, I have wanted anyone to see me.

Taylor.

Why?

Rick.

Because I have marks all over me. You can't see them because I wear this long clothing. They're needle marks...mostly on my left arm and leg, but some on my right, too. I've used drugs, nasty ones, and I've had trouble stopping. Mom and Dad finally sent me away. After I got kicked out I got more marks...ones I can't tell you about. I wanted to come back home, but the folks looked at me and said no. Don't get me wrong. I don't blame them, now. But I want them back. And I want them to want me back. And, I want God to want me back.

Taylor.

God?

Rick.

I've been searching the Scripture, Tay. Our old Bible with the pictures in it that we took to Sunday School. Remember that picture where Cain brought a dead sheep and laid it on a stone altar? And up above the clouds were all dark, like Cain's sacrifice had made God mad? But, remember, the sun was shining on Abel's offering. Cain felt so angry that he killed his little blonde brother. Well, I've never killed anyone, except once I tried to kill myself. But I see those same clouds above me all the time. God gave Cain a mark and sent him away. But Cain must have wanted to come back to his family and back to God. He must have wanted it so bad he could taste it

Taylor.

God gave Cain that mark so no one would kill *him*. It was an act of mercy.

Rick.

Even though he might have been better off dead. He must have been ... (*searching*) hungry... to...make things right. I'm like that Taylor.

Rachel.

(*to TAYLOR*) Why didn't you ever report your money stolen?

Taylor.

Because I knew it was Rick who took it.

Rachel.

And... ?

Taylor.

He was my big brother. I knew he must really need it.

Rachel.

(*back to the letter*)

(*finishing the letter to Matthew*) "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy."

v. Joel, peace-maker

Rachel.

October 27.

Dear Matthew, The news from where you are continues to be so bad. Does it help to say "be careful"? I know you will be. It seems like nothing the United States can do makes any difference. No matter who's the president. I do believe that if we keep trying there will be peace between Israel and its neighbors. But--.

Joel.

I have no faith in peace talks. Talk never helps. Peace *never* happens. I should know.

Rachel.

Why? Are you a political science student? I was watching in the youth room with Joel yesterday. We were watching the news. It was a story about the President trying to reestablish peace talks. Suddenly, Joel got up and turned off the TV

Joel.

No, I have life experience. When I was in fifth grade, my parents started arguing a lot. Then they started avoiding each other, even at dinnertime—which had been a big family time—and Mom even started going to my school events on different nights than Dad. A huge cloud of tension constantly hung in the air. If there was such a thing as a tension alarm in the house, the “smoke” was so thick no amount of waving a towel at the alarm would have stopped its screaming. Man, if you took the batteries out of the alarm it probably wouldn’t have stopped. It was that bad.

To no surprise, Dad soon wanted a separation, which I thought wasn’t all bad. At least they weren’t divorced and I had a chance to try to get them back together.

Rachel.

You tried to make peace?

Joel.

I was going to make them happy again. I was like a scheming Haley Mills for about three months of my life. I persistently invited Dad over for dinner with Mom and me, but he always said that wasn’t a good idea. A couple times I asked him to pick me up so we could do something, and I purposely came home late from school so my parents would be alone in the house together. But, when I came home, Dad would be watching TV in the living room and Mom would be upstairs in her bedroom. I realized the plan wasn’t working when I came home one time and Dad was still waiting in the car. I prayed so hard for God to help me, too, because a little divine intervention couldn’t hurt, right?

Rachel.

How did it—

Joel.

I failed. Miserably. I was so young then that I didn’t realize two things: one, separation is usually just a formality before divorce, and two, Haley Mills had it really easy. I felt that I had somehow let them down, and that as a peacemaker I had let myself down.

Rachel.

(She hugs Joel.) Joel, are you at peace with your father?

Joel.

Yeah. That's cool.

Rachel.

And with your mother?

Joel.

She bugs me a lot, but...yes.

Rachel.

Then you've made two peaceful relationships, it sounds like to me.

Joel.

But what about the third one, the most important one, they're not at peace with each other?

Rachel.

Joel, I think that, in peacemaking, two out of three ain't bad.

Joel.

I suppose....

Rachel.

Joel, you're a child of God.

Joel.

I am?

vi. Gracie

Rachel.

November 2.

Dear Matthew. I'm trying to make peace with my schedule this week. Tomorrow is All Saints Day at church and there are some extra doings for which I have to be there early. Anyway, it's a gray, rainy afternoon and I'm here at the office without too much to do and...

Gracie.

Rachel? Excuse me, Rachel? Are you busy?

Rachel.

Gertrude? Gertrude. No. Come in, please.

Gracie.

It's Gracie, to my friends.

Rachel.

Oh, Grace, I'm sorry. How could I have forgotten? Especially you. You're here all the time, I—I—

Gracie.

Please stop apologizing. And, it's *Gracie*. It's because you're new that I'm here. You can give me some straight answers to important questions.

Rachel.

I'll try.

Gracie.

And, you have a reputation for respecting confidences, absolutely.

Rachel.

I'm glad to hear that.

Gracie.

Let me get right to the point. I have come to the conclusion that I'm doing the right things for the wrong reasons.

Rachel.

All right, Gracie. Then I have three questions. One: what are the right things? Two: what are the wrong reasons? And, three: what has brought you to this conclusion?

Gracie:

Here are the right things: I'm on eight committees, boards, task forces, and special ministries at this church, not to mention president of the choir. I'm here practically every night of the week and sometimes on the weekend.

Rachel.

Gracie.

You're known as one of the most faithful members of the congregation.

Gracie.

I said that those were the right things. Now, here are what may well be the wrong reasons.

Rachel.

OK?

Gracie.

My kids moved out. They're doing fine on their own, even if they're not all great about letters and phone calls. But they were my projects and now, I guess, I'm finished with those. Daryl is busy. He's a good husband, but he has his own projects. So, I've had time to give to the church. Lots of time.

Rachel.

I'm not sure about those being the wrong reasons.

Gracie.

Let's go to question three. Recently, a younger member of the congregation told me that she and some of her friends had hoped that their age group might assume some more of the leadership roles in the congregation, but the "Baby-Boomers" were having a hard time letting go.

Rachel.

That was courageous of her, to say that I mean.

Gracie.

That's one word for it. Anyway, I thought about it and then, the next Sunday, I was sitting in on your class on the Sermon on the Mount. You were talking about the Beatitudes.

Rachel.

I'm so embarrassed. I didn't remember you being there.

Gracie.

It's a big class. There was a good discussion on the Beatitude "Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God." Remember how people were interpreting that one?

Rachel.

Yes, somebody said being pure was more than just doing the right thing. It was doing the right thing--

Gracie.

...for the right reason. And you know, I realized that I was spending a great deal of time doing what I thought were the right things, but I wasn't seeing much of God. So maybe I've been doing them for the wrong reasons. (*Weeps*) That's very hard for me to say.

Rachel.

Gracie, several weeks ago, I accepted this offer to serve my home church as a lay minister, to help the pastor where I could, and to teach a class on the Sermon on the Mount. When I took the job, I thought it might fill my lonely hours now that my fiancée, Matthew, has been called overseas to serve in the army. And, I thought that I might meet some interesting people who I might write about in my doctoral thesis. And, I confess, I thought I might be a blessing to them.

Ever since the first week, I have met people who have shared with me their deepest personal pain. They haven't been just whining or complaining either. These are tough people, good people, dear people. (And, by the way, I don't think I've been able to help a single one of them.) As we worked through the Beatitudes, I began to realize that these were the people whom Jesus called "the Blessed."

And they have been a blessing to me!

November 3.

Dear Matthew. It was announced today that Pastor Tom will be returning to work next week. After church, Pastor Carl told me that Tom's eager to return to teaching my—the Bible class studying the Sermon on the Mount. Well, this may be as good a place as any to change teachers. After talking with Gracie, I think I may need to purify my own heart. In the meantime, Dear Matthew, I've met the saints!

Like Saint Paul. Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Paul.

The feelings will come and go, but I don't want to be separated from God again.

Rachel.

And blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted like Saint Monica.

Monica.

I'm going to try to hold all 112 together with my prayers, God help me!

Rachel.

And blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, like Saint Rick.

Rick.

I'm praying to be right with God.

Rachel.

For they will be filled. And the merciful like Saint Taylor.

Taylor.

I didn't think of it as any big act of mercy. He's my brother and I love him.

Rachel.

And the peacemakers, like St. Joel.

Joel.

Haley Mills had it easy.

Gracie.

And blessed are the pure in heart like you, Rachel, for they will see God.

Rachel.

I've met the saints, Gracie, and they have been grace to me.

END