

“Bridge to Blessing”
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Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-11

Around Christmas, we compared the birth narrative of Jesus in Matthew with the birth narrative of Moses in Exodus: Each son was born under the threat of genocide of Hebrew born children; for Moses, the clever midwives and other women of the story made a plan to fool Pharaoh and spare the lives of Hebrew boys born, allowing Moses to be born and to live by floating him on the river. In Matthew, Herod was the unrighteous ruler who felt threatened by the birth of a baby. With the Magi cleverly tricking Herod by going home another way instead of telling Herod where Jesus was found, and with Mary and Joseph escaping into Egypt, the baby Jesus survived.

Now, as an adult, we have another echo between Moses, the great liberator of the Jewish story, and Jesus. We know that Moses encounters God on Mount Sinai, where he receives the covenant, written in stone, which would guide the relationship between God and God’s people through the wilderness, to the lands they would settle, and beyond. This covenant included the Ten Commandments as well as many other rituals and ways that would mark the Hebrew people as God’s own.

So when Matthew tells of Jesus going up a mountain, and sitting and speaking to the crowds in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, it is a clear comparison between Moses and Jesus. If Moses brought the Hebrew people into liberation from slavery in Egypt, and then into a special covenant relationship with God, what would Jesus bring?

To discover what Jesus brings through his Sermon on the Mount, let’s first look at the crowds he was bringing it *to*. We know the disciples are in the crowd. Additionally, Matthew 7 mentions people who are sick and afflicted, together with those who care for them, made up the crowds, and Jesus would speak with them, and he would ease their burdens, offering them healing.

So we know Jesus was not talking to the people who were high and mighty; no, these were the downtrodden, and Jesus wanted to show them that God has a *particular kind* of relationship with them; God’s eye is on them *especially*.

I was thinking about who was in the congregation of people whom Jesus called “blessed” nearly two thousand years ago, and all week I have been brewing on who Jesus would call “blessed” today. I knew I would be going to a memorial service over the weekend, for the father of one of our church regulars. I could see her and her mourning family among Jesus’ blessed. I also pictured those of you I know who are also grieving someone close to you. I still struggle with grief, even years after a loss, and am familiar with the ache that tugs at the heart. And so when I

picture your faces who are grieving also, I count you among the people for whom Jesus was bringing good news; you too are the people he calls “blessed.”

I kept thinking about this idea of blessing, and how I might present this scripture to you— one that shows up so often in our lectionary, that it is hard to think of ways to talk about it that don’t feel... recycled.

Not to diss recycling. It’s good for the environment, and it’s good for faith. Repetition helps the message stick clearly to our heads. And there’s a good reason these words get stuck in our head, get lifted through the ages, memorized by the faithful, and even are sometimes chosen as last words for someone’s funeral. If I can’t say something new about these verses, then maybe I can preach a simple sermon, and let the simple and beautiful words speak for themselves. After all, it *has* been a demanding month at the church. Our lectionary recycles itself every three years, and the especially important stories and verses of our faith get repeated every year, if not more often than that. The Beatitudes is one of those— so why not just recycle the blessings and feel good by them?

Except over the weekend, the videos have now surfaced of the killing of Tyre Nichols in Memphis earlier this month. Here’s the thing— in our church, we have a range of beliefs. And so the easiest thing would be to tiptoe around current events and stick with old words about blessing in their recycled context.

But the prophet in Micah asked, “God has told you, O mortal, **what is good** and what does the Lord *require* of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” I think, therefore, it’s not an option to recycle words about blessing, and *not* take a look at what happened this month to Tyre Nichols, and the impact it has on black and brown people in this country, and how it impacts those of us who are white. I hope I can do so while respecting the justice this moment demands, and with kindness, and humbly too, for I know I am not an expert on these matters. But as a member of the human community, I know— as Maya Angelou, Dr. King, and the Apostle Paul wrote, each in their own words, **no one can be free when any member is not free.**

Tyre Nichols was beaten, kicked, and killed by people who were supposed to protect and serve, following a traffic stop. I don’t know the full story. I don’t know what happened to make the officers want to pull him over. I don’t know what to do with the complicated and sad fact that the five officers who were first shown as responsible for killing this black man were also black men. But I know that *nothing* justifies the way this man was treated. *Nothing* justifies the fact that he was killed. Although I don’t suffer under the yoke of racism in the same ways black and brown people do, I still can understand that this was not just one man’s suffering. It is a collective trauma on the souls of black and brown people everywhere. His death carries with it the cries of George Floyd, the agony of Breonna Taylor, the weeping of Mamie Till Bradley following the lynching of her 14 year old son, Emmett Till...and so many other names both remembered and forgotten, yet still echoing today. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your

reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Jesus did not say this to *elevate* suffering, or to justify it in contrast to the glories of heaven. Instead, Jesus said these things to show that God has a *particular kind* of relationship with and concern for those who suffer and are oppressed; God’s eye is on them *especially*, and God will not let them go until they find their freedom.

I watched the first two videos, but I decided to stop before I saw the actual beatings. Though I read the reports about Tyre Nichols’ death, it didn’t feel right for me to consume images of another man’s sufferings. Instead, I looked up the website for his photography portfolio. I had learned he was an avid skateboarder, and a dad to a four year old boy. I know that he had cried out for his mom repeatedly as he was being beaten. I hadn’t realized he was a photographer, and the idea that *–in addition to seeking justice–* knowing a little more about the man than his broken body seemed like a way of paying him respect. His website features pictures of the Memphis landscape and its people: Beale Street in lights, train tracks, murals painted onto buildings, a statue of The King– that is, Elvis. But the subject Nichols captured the most was of **bridges**.

I wonder what it was about bridges that lit up Nichols’ artistic imagination. Was he drawn to the geometry of their lines and curve and shape? Was he interested in what river or obstacle the bridge stretched across? Was he searching for a way to get from one place to another in his own life? The answer probably isn’t ours to know. One thing that is true about art is also true about scripture: the audience for both can never truly grasp the exact intention or meaning of the one who made the art, wrote the scripture, or preached the words. Instead what happens in art is a sacred and dynamic relationship between the artist, the art, the viewer, and the communities from which the artist and the viewer come. With scripture, there is a sacred and dynamic relationship between the writer or preacher of the words, the text itself, and the reader of the texts... as well as the communities from which the speaker and the reader come.

Jesus giving the Sermon on the Mount evoked Moses on Mount Sinai. As for me, when I looked at Nichols’ pictures of bridges, I was reminded of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. On March 7, 1965, 600 marchers from the Civil Rights Movement began a protest walk across this bridge, heading toward a 54-mile journey to Montgomery, Alabama, to protest voting injustices that allowed only 1% of eligible black voters to have access to the polls. But before they could complete their crossing of the bridge, the protesters were met at the bend by state troopers with billy clubs, whips and tear gas. They turned back. Two days later, they had 2,000 people with them. Again, they were stopped by state troopers. But finally, on March 21, they made their march to its completion several days later, and their persistence brought forward the Voting Rights Act of 1965 for the whole country.

Bridges that bless aren’t always easy to cross.

Jesus’ words in the Beatitudes are a **bridge** over the troubled waters of these times. They bring those who are suffering and oppressed to their place of blessing. And these blessings Jesus announces aren’t just passive things to be received abstractly. They aren’t meant to glorify suffering in favor of heavenly riches that are otherwise out of reach. Instead, they are meant to

be proclaimed **today**, and in tandem with **action**. Jesus and his disciples were ministering among the crowd, bringing healing to the sick, bread for the hungry, welcome to the outcast, even while Jesus' words still echoed down the mountain. Their work was making Jesus' words *true*.

Our words about blessing, or about justice, are empty without action. We can't just speak them and wait for someone else to make them so. So today, let us ask ourselves these questions, as directions across the bridge that leads to blessing.

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

Luke's gospel says "Blessed are the poor." But whether it is people living in poverty, or people whose spirits are poor, Jesus has a special eye on them. What are we doing to help to lift them up?

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

How do we care for one another in grief? Is it possible that our own fears of death keep us from bringing blessing to others who are in grief?

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Jesus was often subverting hierarchies of power, making the last first. How can we who have enjoyed positions of power step back and support the empowerment of the meek?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

In what ways does our privilege numb our hunger and thirst for justice?

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

In what ways have our hearts' purity been tainted by racism? How has that kept us from seeing God?

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

What are we doing to show mercy? How are we opening ourselves to receive mercy too?

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

I have lost track of how many mass shootings there have been in the past month.

What are we doing to be makers of peace?

Even though I stated earlier in this sermon that Jesus spoke to a particular crowd of people, I think the words from his Beatitudes have blessing and challenge for all of us. *These Beatitudes may speak to you as someone in need of blessing.* If so, I hope they announce to you that Jesus is near, and that God has a special relationship with you right now. God sees you.

These Beatitudes may also speak to you as someone who is already comfortable, already empowered, already in possession of the things that the downtrodden and brokenhearted are longing for. If that is so,, then your challenge is to consider how the Spirit has called, even

required you, to bring blessing to someone else. If so, may you be bold enough to act upon that blessing.