
The Way of Blessedness

Matthew 5:1-12

As your minister, I want to check-in with you this morning. Because undoubtedly—if you are a living, breathing human being—you are carrying quite a lot things as you enter this space today. How are you holding up? It seems extra-daunting to be human in the world right now . . . even just a decent, empathetic human. Has this past year felt like three years, or five?

Many of us are consuming the daily events of the news, near and global. Lately, we are watching all that is unfolding in Minneapolis—where just this week, there was another execution at the hands of masked men play-pretending to be federal law enforcement agents, this time killing VA nurse, Alex Pretti, who joins Renée Goode, who was also murdered only less than a month ago.

On one hand, it all feels like a whole new level of terror that has led to our current fractured crisis of identity here in America. And yet, it also feels part of a problem as old as empire. But, I want to be sensitive to how we show up here together in this space.

I had a seminary professor who would paint a picture for us young ministers-in-training of what we *should* envision when stepping into the pulpit on a Sunday morning. While worshipers are gathered in their Sunday best, he would say, to remember that everyone has spent 6 other days out in the world—in the workplace, at the grocery store, sitting in front of the news, standing in line at DMV, protesting in the streets, stuck in traffic . . .

He would say to imagine if peoples' insides were made visible on the outside: wearing their feelings of rage, or exhaustion, discouragement, grief, or woundedness; . . . to envision how worshipers might come into the worship space feeling malnourished emotionally, maybe spiritually thirsty to the point of dehydration, or desperate, or brokenhearted—and how that would look. So that,

all appearances to the contrary, Sunday mornings might resemble something more like a hospital ward than a collection of people who have it all together, looking as spiffy as you certainly do this morning. And I believe Church shouldn't be a place to escape it all, but a *group huddle* where we are reminded again what it looks like to enter into life more fully and how to be more present to our communities. When we say you are invited to be here just as you are, we really mean that. We believe there is healing in spaces like this where you can be your authentic selves—in every sense of the word, a *sanctuary*.

In light of all that we may be holding this morning, I want to invite us to spend a moment in a centering practice. It's a sung practice. So, allow me to sing it first and then I'll ask you to sing it after me. It goes like this:

Breathing in what I need to be free. [you sing]

Breathing out what I now can let go. [sing]

. . . Now, let's sing both of those lines together. [Sing]

Breathe in, breathe out . . .

We can get so sped up in our day-to-day that even stopping to breathe in this way can be a protest of sorts. And the fundamental mechanism of breathing in, and breathing out, reminds us that at our core there is a duality to being alive.

Listen to some words that I breathed in this week:

"The world is both burning & blooming."

You get the bad news
and the sunrise in the same day.
You cry over the headlines,
then you laugh at a baby
wearing a hat shaped like a bear.
This is the dual citizenship
of being alive.
Rage and reverence,
Grief and grace.
You are allowed to feel both.
You are allowed to scream,
& still notice how good the soup is.
You don't have to choose.

Let it all in.”

I needed the permission of these words, written by author Karen Salmansohn. And I suspect you need them too. “The world is both burning and blooming.” In one breath, we rage with fists clenched toward the sky, demanding whether God has turned God’s back on the vulnerable . . . Whether there can be any relief for those living in war-torn areas of our world . . . Whether God has forgotten the trans kid who is living under the roof of an un-affirming Christian narrative . . . Whether God is still on the side of those resisting the bullying schemes of the powerful and the keepers of privilege. Has God given the earth over to devastation, merely allowing the multifarious abuses of humanity’s negligence? Is the ideal of justice and compassion too weak a force to combat the evil scheming of empire? And we rage.

In my prayers these days, I feel like Samwise Gamgee speaking to Gandalf, in *The Lord of the Rings*: “Is everything sad going to come untrue? What’s happened to the world?” Yet, lately not prayed with the hopeful tone of the lovable little hobbit but with the exasperated tones of exhaustion, impatience, and sometimes, yes, rage.

The prophet Micah reminds us in our reading this morning that the voice of the Lord gives us permission to, “Rise, plead [our] case before the mountains, and let the hills hear [our] voice.” God makes space for our outrage and attends our cries when we resist how our present reality isn’t aligning with the justice of God’s kingdom. Yet, with our rising up, we remember that to be human also means letting the sun in too, that there is also grace, that we “don’t have to choose” between the two.

Being human means grieving loss, and still showing up to that dinner party to enjoy human connection, good food, and laughter. Being human means expending whatever energy we can muster to protest the relentless evils of our time, and coming home to your favorite chair and a bowl of ice cream. Being human means watching the news these days and feeling deeply connected to our current crisis, and then coming here to sing a hymn about what beloved community should look like—not because it heals anything right away, but because without a vision, we will most certainly perish. “You don’t have to choose,” reminds the poet, “Let it all in.”

Breathing in what I need to be free. [you sing]

Breathing out what I now can let go.

Now, together.

Breathe in, breathe out . . .

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus is painting a picture of the kingdom of God here and now, as it is in "heaven." And note that Matthew uses the word "heaven" as a synonym for "God" or the realm of God, not a place you go after you die. In the Beatitudes, Jesus is reminding us what is most true among the deafening noise and narratives of empire. Jesus gives us something we can hold close when empire is wreaking havoc on the lives, bodies, and souls of those around us. And truth will always continue to show up to call us back to its primordial voice. Though the Beatitudes seem radical and upside down, its truth is as ancient as breathing. It lives in us. It was intuitive within us before it was taught *out of us* by patriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy, and other expressions of corruption. And to be sure, the Beatitudes aren't a lesson for us to learn, but a reminder to unlearn empire-thinking so that we can relearn the ways of beloved community, the way of love.

One of my spiritual heroes Richard Rohr, says: "The Eight Beatitudes offer us a more spacious world, a world where I do not have to explain everything, fix everything, or control anything beyond myself . . . [They] are about changing me, not changing other people. Wonderfully, it is not about being right anymore. Who can fully do the Beatitudes "right"? It is about being in right relationship, which is a very different agenda."

It would seem an odd group of people to aspire to be a part of: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the peacemakers, the persecuted. Not the group that would seem to "make waves" in this world. And were we to read the Beatitudes as written in the imperative voice, as a command, we might see that Jesus is laying out an impossible blueprint to follow — you don't just choose to mourn, or make the decision to be meek. Yet the text is written in the indicative voice, simply declaring what is, as a statement of fact. This is what heaven here and now looks like. This is to whom it belongs.

If you don't find yourself described in this list, it will take not a prayer of salvation, no morality boxes to check off, but an offering of your whole self, your very life, to become the blessed person that Jesus desires us to be.

Let our resistance to anything else be felt deep in our bones by our singing and breathing together:

Breathing in what I need to be free.

Breathing out what I now can let go.

Breathe in, breathe out . . .

Amen.