

Micah 6:1-8
Psalm 15
Matthew 5: 1-12
1 Corinthians 1:18-31

The Rev. Laura Palmer
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields
January 29th, 2023
Year A

God's Beatitude

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our strength and redeemer. Amen

Don't be fooled by the Beatitudes. There are times when they're no help at all.

Years ago I was paged to the ED for a trauma. A young boy had collapsed in his classroom and was rushed to the hospital. Teams of doctors were fighting to jump start his heart in the trauma bay and bring him back to life. His small body was limp under screaming bright lights. The eyes of the doctors said it was not going well.

His mother was brought in to see the intense effort being made before it stopped. I came in with her. When she was told that the doctors were unable to save her son her screams tore through my heart like acid. Her dead child was placed in her arms. When she began to wail that she'd never had him baptized, I asked if she'd like me to. She nodded through her tears and then, kneeling beside her, I made the sign of the cross on his forehead and baptized him as "Emmanuel."

A short while later I overheard the social worker say was completing the necessary paperwork and I heard her say, "The family lives in a homeless shelter."

I was supposed to lead a Spirituality Group that night and I did. But in that moment, the chaplain wasn't even sure she believed in God.

On that Wednesday night, the Beatitudes didn't count for much. Being blessed because you're poor, weak, and screaming in grief seemed designed to make someone else feel good.

And in the immediate raw and ugly horror of life, that's true. But the truth is, the Beatitudes count for everything; they tell us of the depth of God's love for us.

When I rail at the cruelty and unfairness in this world which happens a lot in the hospital, it reflects both my own privilege and comfort and reminds me that I'm missing the point about Jesus' ministry reflected in the Beatitudes: the Beatitudes upend everything we think about the world, everything we think "should" be true and fair.

These words—the Sermon on the Mount—are so familiar it is easy to forget the context: they are the first words Jesus speaks to his newly commissioned disciples--and as author and theologian Debie Thomas points out, blessing comes first:

Blessing, not judgment. Blessing, not terms and conditions. Blessing, not penance. Blessing, not altar calls...Jesus starts his ministry by telling the disciples who and what they already are: *they are blessed*. Blessed, fortunate, privileged, favored. Why? Because they are near and dear to God's heart. Whatever else Jesus's first followers go on to learn or accomplish in the future is merely the outgrowth of what is *already* their ground-of-being, their identity, their solid-as-a-rock foundation. God gifts their identities to them, without condition or measure. They are freely blessed, and so they're freed to bless others.¹

Blessing is the ground of our being as well. It is given to us in our baptism and every time when we kneel at the altar, open our hands, and receive "the body of Christ, the bread of heaven." Blessing is freely given to us over and over again. And we forget that over and over again.

The screaming mother in the ED however did not. She wanted her child baptized. With every reason to feel abandoned and furious at God, she wanted the sacrament of baptism for her son. His name: Emmanuel means "God is with us" which is who and what Jesus is. Writes Thomas:

What Jesus bears witness to in the Beatitudes is God's unwavering proximity to pain, suffering, sorrow, and loss. God is nearest to those who are lowly, oppressed, unwanted, and broken. God isn't obsessed with the shiny and the impressive; God is too busy sticking close to what's messy, chaotic, unruly, and unattractive.²

¹ Thomas, Debie, "Journey with Jesus",

² Ibid.

The Beatitudes are where Jesus draws a line in the sand and there is no doubt where he stands. I don't know who first said this, but I wish I had: "When you draw lines about who's in and who's out, remember where you're putting Jesus."

I believe you're putting Jesus with the trans parishioner who recently walked forward to receive communion recently in a Catholic Church in New Jersey and was pulled out of the communion line by another parishioner—denied of receiving the very gift he had given to us.

I found that shocking, not surprising, but still shocking, when I heard it from a colleague, but when I mentioned it to Jim Littrell he said simply, "Well, I don't."

"The only way evil can succeed is to disguise itself as good. And one of the best disguises for evil is religion," writes Br. Richard Rohr:

Just pretend to love God, go to church every Sunday, recite the creed, and say all the right things. Someone can be racist, be against the poor, hate immigrants, and be totally concerned about making money ... but still go to church each Sunday and be "justified" in the eyes of religion.³

The Rev. Dr. Nora Johnson gave an exquisitely powerful homily on the Beatitudes here at Pride Evensong last June 5th. She made the point that as a member of the Queer community, the Beatitudes are a mirror.

Jesus knows about isolation and exile. And he knows that there's a particular beauty, a particular healing and that in looking into the eyes of the poor and meek and those who long for justice and being one with them. Knowing that in his case, they are one with God, that he is the meeting place between human frailty and divine light.⁴

Which places Jesus on a street in Memphis as Tyre Nichols, a 29 year-old African American man, father of a four year-old son, Fed Ex employee, a photographer who loved taking pictures of sunsets, was savagely beaten by 5 black police officers after a traffic stop as he screamed, "Mom, Mom, Mom."

The video is excruciating. Unbearable to watch. But we must bear witness to yet another crucifixion of an innocent man on the cross of police violence. "What did

³Rohr, Richard, daily email from The Center for Action and Contemplation, 1/26/23

⁴Johnson, Nora, "Beatitudes for Pride," a sermon preached at The Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, 06/05/22

I do?” Nichols cries. Nothing, it turns out after over an hour video footage found no evidence of “reckless driving.”

Nichols is this generation’s Emmitt Till. After being dragged from his car, he broke free, and ran for his mother’s home—he was only 100 yards or so away—when he was tackled and beaten until he was almost dead, dying 3 days later in a hospital. His mother, like Emmitt Till’s mother, released pictures of her son’s broken body from the ICU— for the world to see what hate does.

Unspeakable acts of savagery mean there are no words. Not from me, not today. There is no meaning, no explanation, for the viciousness of our capacity for violence and inhumanity.

But it is staggering to realize where the Beatitudes put Jesus. O come, O come Emmanuel, we sang a few weeks ago and somehow, Jesus always does, entering our pain, our anguish, our violence.

There he was, Emmanuel, a child, baptized in death in the ED. There he was with a transgender worshipper who was ripped from a communion line, and there he was, in the broken in the body of Tyre Nichols, crying for his mom on a Memphis street.

We crucify Jesus over and over again, this savior who came to be one of us-- God’s beatitude⁵-- In this most recent, most public, most ghastly, most gruesome horror-- the murder of Tyre Nichols-- may we join together a community of faith-- in silence to bear witness to all that we have become.

(silence)

AMEN

⁵Bolz Weber Nadia, “The Corners; God’s Beatitude,” Jan. 13th, 2020

