

Blessing Beyond Blessing and A Prayer for Tyre Nichols
Micah 6:1-8
Matthew 5:1-12
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Fourth Sunday in Epiphany
Woodbury UMC
January 29, 2023

In putting this message together, I kept coming back to the controversies of about two decades ago, regarding the Ten Commandments. Alabama judge Roy Moore became famous for installing a granite monument depicting the ten commandments in the state's court building, and that led to high profile court battles on whether or not it could stay. A federal court ordered it removed, he would not, and so HE was removed from his position by the Alabama Judiciary. He has been a regular figure in the news for many, many things he has said, done, and advocated, all of which are not relevant to my point, other than his advocacy that Christianity as he understands it should order public policy.

Moore was not an anomaly. Others have similarly wanted to have the Ten Commandments in public spaces. Back in 1980, the Supreme Court struck down Kentucky's policy of displaying the ten commandments in all public schools. In 2013, Oklahoma schools took the ten commandments down from school walls, rather than face legal action from a group supporting separation of church and state.

In 2021, North Dakota legislation provided for displaying the ten commandments in public schools, with the bill's sponsor saying that "no religion is offended by the ten commandments. None." (By the way, the first commandment is I am the Lord Thy God, Thou shalt have no other Gods before me.) She further argued that "after we took prayer and the Ten Commandments out of the public school" teen pregnancy and crime rates rose.

I looked it up. That is not true.

Why am I telling you this? In part, because in my research, I saw that many courthouses have had ten commandments related displays or artwork, a few going back over a century. I share this to note that at one point, this was considerably less controversial than it has been for the last 50 years. Also, in my research, a lot of these cases seem to be about public schools, not courthouses. It didn't seem to be about Moses as lawgiver, but something else. Perhaps if we told all the children that they would be condemned by God if they did not do as they were told, it would be to their benefit.

Well, that brings me to our Gospel scripture — well, almost. We are getting there, though! First off, what is it saying? That word Jesus

keeps using, *makarism* in the Greek, roughly translates as happy, in a privileged circumstance, well-off, fortunate.

In the NRSV, that word is Blessed. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

In CEB it’s happy. “Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

I don’t know anyone who prefers the second one — everyone likes the first one better. That might be because Blessed signals God’s favor, hashtag blessed. It shows you are humble AND living an enviable life—the very definition of a humblebrag, perhaps.

Now we get to the gospel. There is a big problem with this, and I’ve seen it best explained by NT scholar Dr David Lose :

When I hear the Beatitudes, it’s hard for me not to hear Jesus as stating the terms under which I might be blessed. When you hear “Blessed are the pure in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” do you think, “Am I pure enough in spirit to get a blessing?” When you hear “blessed are the peacemakers...,” do you think “Yeah, I really should make more effort towards making

peace.” When you hear “blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,” you might think — I don’t want to mourn, and hearing this doesn’t make me any more eager for additional mourning.

It may be that our picture of God is distorted, that we can only imagine God as a stern, demanding law-giver, and so it seems out of character for God to bless without requirement. It seems possible that many of us have seen that God staring us down from the school wall, reminding us just how close we are to well deserved damnation. If that has been your experience, I want you to know that you have been misled. I am so sorry that you have been manipulated in this way.

We are intimately familiar with our faults and insecurities and failures. Maybe in our heart of hearts we do not feel worthy of that grace. Knowing this about ourselves — and knowing that God knows us even better! — we may find it hard to accept that God loves us unconditionally. Yes, you’ve heard me tell you this before, and probably more than a few pastors before me.

We’re used to paying for our mistakes, reaping the consequences. Some of us are used to being told that we should have known better, that

whatever pain we are to suffer is our own fault anyway. It may not only be unexpected, but downright unsettling and nearly inconceivable to imagine that God behaves differently, showering us with blessing apart from anything we have done, earned, or deserve.

I am willing to give the Roy Moores of the world the benefit of the doubt that he believed he was doing the right thing as a Christian. Personally I am strongly against including religious displays in public places as a way to claim them for people like us, or to intimidate others, or to attack the religious beliefs of others. (I think that usually, this is done for all of those reasons.) But what if this sort of person is sincerely trying to include something they think is good and important for everyone to know, that might persuade them towards a better life?

What if instead, we posted the beatitudes in the schools? What if rather than reinforcing to young people that they have already been judged as not good enough, every schoolchild would conspicuously see posted that God loves them as they are, no matter what hand life has dealt them? That they are loved by a God they don't know, not because they deserve it, but because that is how it works. Even if the world tells you that you are unwanted, unloved, and never good enough, right there on the school wall is a message that they are loved beyond comprehension, and without condition.

Whichever translation you prefer, note that Jesus isn't set up conditions or terms under which you may be blessed. Jesus is not telling you the categories of people who are blessed, encouraging you to find yours. Jesus is just plain blessing people. All kinds of people. All kinds of down-and-out, vulnerable people. Jesus is telling all who will listen that God regularly shows up in mercy and blessing just where you least expect God to be — with those who are poor, those who are mourning, with the meek and the peacemakers rather than the strong and victorious. No one believes that, of course, back then or now. Yet if God shows up here, Jesus is saying, blessing the weak and the vulnerable, then God will be everywhere, showering all of creation and its inhabitants with blessing!

God has been blessing you constantly, wastefully even. On your drive home today, look out the window and note everyone you see. Even if they don't think there IS a God, God is still blessing them anyway. And then remember just how much God is blessing you, every day. Amen.

A Prayer for Tyre Nichols

A couple of months ago I spent some time talking about prayer, encouraging us to pray more specifically. I suggested that while it's good that we pray, maybe we should be more specific about what it is that

we're praying about. As we enter into a time of prayer, I've got something I'd like us to pray about, and I want to be a little more specific about that with you.

It is self evident that there are plenty of good people in the world that want to help other people. They want to help bring about goodness and decency, and they are willing to do the work that it takes to become police officers in order to make their communities better and safer places.

Racism is real. Racism is a real problem. Racism in policing is a real problem. Today I want us to consider something entirely different from that, because what went wrong in the killing of Tyre Nichols that so many have read about or seen the video in the past days? It goes beyond a discussion of racism, and into one about the entire police system in our country. The evidence as I understand it, is that good people go into that system and become people capable of doing the sorts of things that we saw in that video of Tyre Nichols being killed.

The problem of police violence, and fear, and intimidation, is one that has been on my mind a lot lately. I find myself becoming more sympathetic to the police. This is because I also try to be a good person. I also want to help people, and I want to bring good and decency into the

world. I am also quite aware that I have lost any credibility with a lot of people, simply because I am a minister. That means I am part of an institution that is pushing our nation towards white Christian nationalism. Part of the system that looked the other way when faced with widespread child abuse. I am someone who drank the Kool-Aid, and so now I'm one of them instead of one of us.

I look just like so many other white male ministers who have accepted access to power and money and political influence, instead of clinging tightly to their prophetic witness, crying out what is right and what is wrong. The prophets of old did this, no matter the consequences. The prophets of today have often found that if you shut up, that's how you make friends, and it can be quite lucrative.

I know all of that, and knowing all of that I have not left the church. I'm right here in the middle of that system. Aware of all of that and I am trying my best anyway. There are plenty of cops in my same situation, who look at so much police corruption, and beatings, and abuses, and they are disgusted. They recognize that their own lives are now in greater danger, because of how the public perceives the actions done by some of them. Cops recognize that they are in danger if they speak out, or if they're whistleblowers. Things tend to not go too great

for whistleblowers. Yet lots of them work for a better police force anyway. For many of those cops, I suspect most of them they will do a lot of good that will never be known publicly. Any horror they're involved with? That will be known publicly, and how demoralizing that must be for them.

What is it that makes a human being capable of the things that those men did to another human being, calling out for his mother as he died? I bet when they signed up, when they enlisted, I bet none of them were capable of those acts of horror and atrocity, but that's what the system turned out.

I have a lot I want to pray about today.

I want to pray for all of those who love Tyre Nichols, and are horrified and grief-stricken, and numb.

I want to pray for all of those people who have lived lives that include experiences such that just hearing about this story triggers trauma from the things they've experienced.

I want to pray for all who wonder if they will be the next hashtag. Or their children or their grandchildren.

I want to pray for those who saw that video and have finally just given in to despair, giving up any hope that things will ever get any better.

I want to pray for a nation that has seemingly grown to accept that this is something that just kind of happens. That it's the price we pay for being a country of laws (so long as it doesn't happen to us personally).

I want to pray for things I don't quite have the words for.

I want to pray for those people who are trying to pray, but they don't have the words either.

But I know that God knows what they are trying to say.

Please pray with me.

Creator God, we are gathered here as your people. We know that you created all of this, and all of us, at each step along the way declared good. Things have changed since then. In your creation there are many things which are not good, which are not of you, which are not of your dream for the world you have created for your children, Lord.

There is so much on our hearts and minds. There is so much weighing us down, we who call ourselves children of God.

I ask that you would help us to see that we are all sisters and brothers and siblings created by you.

I ask that you would help us as we seek to do your will, even when your will is very hard indeed.

I ask that you would help us as we seek to make the world truly be the kingdom of God, in whatever small way we can.

I ask that you would help us to remember our own prophetic voices, and I ask that you would give us freedom from fear when it is time to use those voices to point out things which are not of you.

I ask that you would be with those who are not only victimized by all the things that I called out, but who are seen as people are not worthy of human compassion because they are inside a system in which they've tried to do some good.

I ask that you would help us recognize that this this world is complicated, and that we not reduce human beings to a stereotype or to a cliché or to an easy target.

I ask that you would help us recognize that your will is the redemption of all of us, indeed the redemption of all of creation. That you are love made perfect, casting out hate, and so we who claim Christ as Lord, cast the hate out of us that is so often finding its way in.

Lord, I ask your blessings on this church, that as we seek to do your will in this community, as we seek to make disciples, as we seek to transform the world—Lord, let us see with clarity what you would have us do. And if that is something that makes us uncomfortable, Lord, bless us with courage. Bless us with strength so that we may do your will. Bless us with vision so that we may see the world as you see it, so that we see the ways that we are able to do some good.

I ask your blessings on this nation, that we find the ways which bring us together to be stronger than the things which do not. We are broken in many ways, Lord. Help us heal one another. Help us do so in your name. Help us do so in a way that does not pretend the cracks and fractures never happened, but acknowledges that they are part of the story too. And that they don't define the story, that YOU define the story. That you are God. That you are OUR God.

Lord, this day I especially ask that you hear the wordless prayers. Those felt by many in their hearts, those felt by people who aren't even sure to whom they are addressing their prayers. Lord you know all, so you know that too.

Lord, with all that, I thank you that you blessed us first. That you've led all of us here, as parts of this congregation. That we are all parts of this church, and of families, and of this community, and that we relate to each other in many many ways. That we have the vision to see that that's how you care for us, and that's how we care for one another in your name, Lord.

I thank you for the great good you have brought into this world throughout history through your prophets. Through your son. Through

the Scriptures. Through answered prayer. Lord, I ask that you would help us to perceive you and all of these things. To remember you as king of this world. That you would help us not to have hearts which are calloused so that that these horrors do not affect us. Instead, Lord, let them remind us that there is much work to do, and help us to see where we can be part of that. Not that we have to do it all, not that we need to earn your blessing, Lord, but that it is a blessing to be a blessing. We ask that we who are your people gathered, Lord, let us live lives that are truly lives indicative of being your people.

Finally, Lord, I ask your blessing on the people of this congregation. We have prayed for those who are ill, for those who are grieving. We have prayed with those who celebrate new beginnings and new life. Lord, let us remember that good and that beauty, that people helping one another and people starting afresh—all of that is out there too. Lord, it is my prayer that as people with eyes open to the challenges and the problems in the world, that we remain people with eyes open to the joy and the beauty that you have put around us, too. That we would derive strength from that, through you.

And I ask this in your own blessed name. Amen.