Tyre Nichols

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Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 2:1-12

***Micah 6:1-8***

***6 Hear what the Lord says:  Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.
2Hear, you mountains, the case of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth, for the Lord has a case against his people, and he will contend with Israel.***

***3“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!
4For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.
5O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.”***

***6“With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
7Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
8He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but*** ***to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?***

***Matthew 5:1-12***

***5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2And he began to speak and taught them, saying:***

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

***4“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.***

***5“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.***

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

***7“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.***

***8“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.***

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

***10“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

***11“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.***

Last week, we heard about the shooting in Monterey Park, CA. I felt bad that I forgot to mention it during our prayer time. Sadly I was given another chance to pray for a solution to the gun violence in America, when there was another shooting, the very next day, this time in Half Moon Bay, our near neighbor. This week the tragic murder of Tyre Nichols has broken our hearts. Mr. Nichols was a 29 year old man, aspiring photographer, who grew up in Sacramento, and just moved to Memphis two years ago.

I have read that when we don’t pay attention to anger, we can easily be complacent about the injustices that anger us. That complacency will easily turn to cynicism and that makes us remain still. As averse as some are to anger, myself included, at least anger can motivate us to change ourselves, or try to find a way to be a part of a change process, whereas cynicism means that we have decided to accept whatever is. In order to stop my slide into cynicism, I offer this sermon in the form of an imaginary letter to the five officers who took turns stripping Tyre Nichols of his life.

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Dear now former police officers in Memphis,

I suppose I should thank you for providing me such a perfect sermon illustration for the combination of two Biblical texts: Micah 6:8 about justice, humility and mercy alongside the Beatitudes from Matthew, chapter 5, which honor simplicity, hopefulness and compassion. I will try to offer with words, a picture of that hoped for Kingdom of Heaven, knowing that Mr. Nichols probably could have offered a real picture, a photo of some place where he witnessed the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. Since he is not here, I hope this letter may be of service in some small way.

You may have heard of the Beatitudes, or the Blessings, in the Bible. They occur in two places, the gospel of Luke and the gospel of Matthew. The Luke version contains both blessings and woes. Blessed are you who…but woe to you who… is the formula used. Reading the Matthew version of the Beatitudes, we might feel like we got off easy because we don’t have to read any “woes.” Without reading “woe to you who…” we won’t read anything that directly accuses us or shames us.

Unfortunately, scripture never works that way. When it comes to scripture, you can run but you can’t hide. The beatitudes in Matthew 5 have a wider and deeper claim on us because when we are only faced with blessings, we realize on a deeper level where we are or are not blessed by the statements there.

Take the first four blessings for example:

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

***4“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.***

***5“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.***

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

“These first four beatitudes declare blessing for those who were traditionally understood as being *defended* *by God*: the poor [and not just referring to those who lack monetary resources], those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness/justice.”1

“In Matthew’s writing, we are to read these as a human response to the Gospel. “The blessings are directed toward those who have a certain disposition and inclination to act in ways consistent with God’s will. Matthew is taking an ethical perspective.”1

It is this ethical perspective that troubles me the most about your behavior officers. The second set of Matthew’s beatitudes blesses those who do what is right by being merciful and pure in heart, making peace and enduring the persecution that attends following in the way of Jesus Christ.”

***7“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.***

***8“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.***

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

***10“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

Can you see now why the Matthew version of the beatitudes, without the woes, still has a way of convicting us?

Each of us needs to read this text and decided within our own hearts, how the scripture speaks to us. When we do, we will not need to read the comparable “woes” from the Luke version of the beatitudes – we will write our own woes on our heart and have the opportunity to change our actions in the future.

The beatitudes are a description of a way of life that will lead to actions that will in turn usher in the Kingdom of Heaven. They are not a set of instructions. They are as one person described it, “a letter from the other side” a description of what life will be like after we live this lifestyle. We will receive mercy; we will see God; we will be called children of God; we will be fed; we will be comforted; our thirst for justice will be filled.

Jesus’ words are not inconsistent with words from the ancient prophets. 700 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Micah heard the cries of the Israelites, yearning to know what God wanted from them. Would God be happy with them if they gave burnt offerings or a young calf, as prescribed by some of the temple authorities? How about quantity? How about thousands of rams; 10,000s of rivers of oil, that valuable commodity? How about if I give even my first born child, in exchange for my transgression? “the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

Micah reminds them that God has already said what is required, what the Lord will be pleased with. God is pleased with actions. To do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. Matthew’s blessings emphasize the human response to the Gospel through “authentic virtue and doing God’s will.” Actions in keeping with the spirit of the beatitudes will lead to a life of actions that work for justice; that show us to be people who love kindness; and will keep us humble as we walk in God’s ways. “If we approach the beatitudes this way, we see they invite us into a way of being in the world that leads to particular practices.”2

In Christ, you and we are already children of God. While it may seem as though the beatitudes are impractical in today’s competitive, fearful, competitive, power hungry world do not lose hope. I am frightened by your show of force and power against a smaller man, five men to one, using all of your toxic masculinity, in the dark where we are all tempted to act in ways we might not, were we more visible, to be so brutal to another human. While we should be happy that this is not another officer involved shooting, in some ways this was worse because you didn’t even have the impersonal distance of a bullet. Your brutality came from your hands, over and over.

And yet, I refuse to remain afraid, refuse to become cynical in my acceptance of your example. You will be judged by the courts. Your futures may be in the hands of others, as Mr. Nichol’s future was in your hands. Ours is not to judge or determine outcomes, that is for God. What you five did, did not show mercy, was not humble or kind, and was not just.

While this letter is addressed to you five, the message is for us all. Living a life reflecting on the relationship with and response to God as suggested in the Beatitudes, will lead us to actions that show justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Deb

Let us pray,

1Anna Case-Winters, Matthew, from the BELIEF series commentary, p.76

2Charles James Cook, “Feasting in the Word” commentary series, Year A, Vol. 1, p.308

"May all beings be held in compassion.

May all beings be free from pain.

May all beings be free from sorrow.

May all beings be at peace."

~Spirit Rock