

The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

Year A

Matthew 5:1-12; Micah

January 29, 2023

In the Name of the One God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Driving in to work on Friday morning, I was frazzled. I was late in meeting the leader of the Ethiopian congregation, stressed over having to finish up preparations for the annual meeting (having spent most of Thursday in meetings), and worried I would not have any time to work on this sermon.

I was at the stoplight ready to turn onto Quaker and said out loud (to my Dog, Minji) "God I wish somebody else would preach on Sunday."

I don't know if I was complaining or praying.

But I heard a distinct response – and it didn't come from my Minji.

"Jesus is preaching on Sunday, Robin. You don't have to!"

Ah yes, it's hard to preach a sermon on a sermon!

I can let Jesus - and his Sermon on the Mount - do the talking this morning!!!

And it turns out this is a good thing...

because as you all know the rest of Friday was tragic.

And I have no words.

Other than that I pray For Tyre Nichols, his family, his community and our broken, broken world.

All day Friday the headlines screamed - somewhat obscenely :

"Soon – this afternoon, later today, this evening – any minute now - video footage of Tyre Nichol's death will be available for us all to watch."

Literally it was like a countdown. As if we were turning the page to a new year.

Instead... it was the same old story.

...

I don't know about you, but I haven't seen the footage and I don't plan to.

I'm of the same mind as Charles Blow who write in the NY Times, "The spectacle of a televised countdown to the showing of the video in which Tyre Nichols was savagely beaten by Memphis police officers doesn't just theatricalize Black death; it is a damning indictment of American perversion."*

We are obsessed with violence and our world is saturated in it.

I have no plans to encounter and watch the violence that is Tyre's death. But I also know there is privilege in that statement. There are many who cannot choose to look away.

I remember when I was living in a very violent neighborhood in Johannesburg, one of the lessons I took from my year living there was that there are people in our world (probably the majority of people in our world) who cannot wake up in the morning and say "I choose not to encounter violence today."

Violence was – and is – everywhere. Most people don't have the option to look away.

And whether or not we pull the trigger, or throw the punch, or buy the games, we are all somewhat complicit in the world we have created – a world very much at odds with the one Jesus is calling us to create in his sermon this morning.

A world which could be just a little more Holy if we would all take the words of Micah to heart.

*He 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?*

If we take these words from Micah to heart, if we try to live them, can they actually help us?

in the decisions we make -
or the actions we take?

If we take these words to heart, can they help us know what do we do when confronted with a dilemma like the one we were confronted with on Friday?

Watching the video would contribute to the theatricalization of black death, but it might also move us to empathy and action...

*He 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?*

“To turn away in circumstances like this would not merely be to succumb to a loss of nerve, but to risk a loss of heart,” as another writer in the NY Times says.

“In insisting that the world see what had been done to her son, RowVaughn Wells, Tyre’s mother, recalled [Emmett Till’s mother], who in 1955 placed the disfigured body of her murdered son in an open coffin so that the viciousness of the racists who killed him could not be denied.”

Yet, this writer continues, “a delicate ethical line separates witness — an active, morally engaged state of attention — from the more passive, less demanding condition of spectatorship.”

The spectacle of violence has a way of turning even sensitive souls into gawkers and voyeurs.”**

Looking at our decision to watch or not to watch through the lens of the passage from Micah – or through an understanding of our orientation – as witness or spectator – might make our choice more clear.

But it wont make it any less difficult. Whatever choice we make we will be met with tragedy.

There are reasons why we will choose to watch or not watch the video, but we can't escape the tragedy.

And for that we are Blessed.

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

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

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

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

This is how Jesus begins his ministry of teaching – with this sermon, these beatitudes, the words – “Blessed are”

Just last week we heard Matthew's account of the calling of the first disciples. Now we fast forward a few months and we find Jesus being followed by thousands of people.

Inspired by his preaching and healing, huge crowds encircle Jesus wherever he goes seeking healing for themselves and those they love.

This morning we hear that one day at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus sees the crowds but rather than engaging with them, he retreats to a mountain with his disciples.

Though we sometimes think of this “Sermon on the Mount” being preached to hundreds of people, as we see in Matthew's version of the account, Jesus is only speaking with his disciples.

This detail suggests that the focus of his teaching is for those of us who, like his disciples, desire to follow Jesus not because we might meet him, be healed and return to our old lives, but because we know that through encountering, knowing and following Jesus, we are being drawn into a new life – the very life and mission of God.

And living in this life – living in God and God's mission – means living in a world in which one's humanity is tied up with another's. That Christ's humanity is tied to ours and ours is tied, through him, to our neighbor. If someone is in pain, they are not alone in their pain. It is shared by God. It is shared by us.

Blessed are they who mourn...

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...

Blessed are the peacemakers...

Blessed is the family of Tyre Nichols.

Blessed is the community of Memphis.

Blessed are those who are taking to the streets.

Blessed – not because they are living in pain and sorrow and fear and anger – but because God is already with them and doing whatever God can – to turn this violent world upside down!

And blessed are we when we enter into the life of our neighbor – tragic and broken and just maybe...in the midst of it all – bravely hopeful.

...

Our Gospel this morning is just that – it is Good News.

Something is changing. Jesus is inaugurating a new - stronger - more powerful - Kingdom.

Jesus is inaugurating the Kingdom of Heaven – and we are so close that we can taste it.

And we will in a few moments when we gather around that altar.

At the same time - as we leave this Kingdom-celebrating space this morning – the taste of Jesus' world still lingering – we know that we also - live in a world that crucified him.

We are in the middle of a Venn diagram – two worlds collide and in the middle lives you and me within the expanding promise of God.

Our job is to help one world – one Kingdom - eclipse the other.

It's already happening – that's what we celebrated at the end of last month – as we sat in this dark sanctuary, lit our candles and sang silent night.

Today, in the shadow of Tyre's death and in the light of God's inbreaking Kingdom, we have choices to make.

But we make those choices within the context of covenant.

Jesus is speaking directly to those who suffer in our world. For those with whom he came to dwell.

He will enter into their suffering and he will transform it through his presence and his power.

He promises not that they *WILL* be Blessed – one day.

He promises they are – right now.

And we too are people of this promise.

We are the people of the covenant.

Will we proclaim our promise not just with the words we speak but with every decision we make?

He 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.*

My friends, we don't have to look far to see the darkness that surrounds us, the pain that fills hearts, and the fear and hopelessness that plague entire communities.

Moments and decisions like we encountered on Friday will come before us day after day. It was the same with his Jesus' disciples. And he prepared them like he prepares us – showering us with truth, and mercy, grace and blessing.

Amen.

Sources:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/27/opinion/tyre-nichols-video.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/28/arts/television/body-cam-video-tyre-nichols-watch.html>