

Blessed Are You

January 29, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Matthew 5: 1-13

Friends, let me begin by saying we are inundated with lists these days. Internet clickbait thrives on them, and who doesn't get sucked in sometimes. "Five foods to avoid!" "Best places to travel on a shoestring!" "10 reasons why the internet loves lists. "And yet, if you are like me, you'd be adrift without some lists! Love 'em or leave 'em, we've all got 'em: to-do lists, shopping lists, playlists, book lists, bucket lists, phrases-that-rhyme-with-bucket lists! My own fascination with lists began pre-internet when I was a kid. In the fourth grade, my birthday must have fallen on a day I was out sick. I'll never forget when my amazing 4th-grade teacher, Mrs. McFadden, showed up at our front door after school with her best-ever chocolate cake (she brought one to class for every student on their birthday). She also brought a gift that I still have. It was a big "Book of Lists!" I started devouring them almost as quickly as the cake!

Umberto Eco once said: "*The list is the origin of culture.*" The full quote reads: "The list is the origin of culture. It's part of the history of art and literature. What does culture want? To make infinity comprehensible. It also wants to create order -- not always, but often. And how, as a human being, does one face infinity? How does one attempt to grasp the incomprehensible? Through lists, through catalogs, through collections in museums and through encyclopedias and dictionaries."

I came across this quote yesterday while pondering and praying over two very different lists. On the one hand - a grim, gut-wrenching, rage-inducing, and still-running list of Black and Brown lives murdered by non-military law enforcement. Police killed over 1100 Americans in the past year alone, and a majority were persons of color. On that list were Tyre Nichols, killed in Memphis on January 7, and Sayed Fasel killed by police right here in Cambridge two days before. In my mind's eye, I see these names at some point being added and honored and remembered in memorials and museums as our nation continues to reckon with this and other distinctly American, historically rooted forms violence that are shamefully still wreaking havoc today. And to think...this list replaced the one that had been top of my heart and yours just days before - a similarly tragic and ongoing list of mass shootings. 48 so far this year. It's not only the cities and sites of terror and surrounding communities that are forever changed, but individual human beings, the parents' little babies, the beloved siblings forever wounded or lost, all precious children of God! Yes, we must pray and say their names, repeatedly. Say his name. Say her name. Say their name. And surely, we do so individually and in lists when necessary to make infinity comprehensible. Think about it. We do so because we know there is an infinite depth of pain already inflicted, one still carried every day. The pain is incomprehensible to our minds, hearts, and souls. It is too much! It is way too much! And so, we have lists! And I wonder, too, if there's some statement here about the state of our so-called American culture. Could it be that we are still at an origin or even pre-origin stage of anything remotely resembling a civilized, broadly inclusive, decidedly anti-racist culture, for we are only now beginning to reckon with, comprehend and account for the unreconciled volumes of violence from our nation's founding? That's a sermon for another day, but amid our ongoing culture wars and refusals to teach certain kinds of history, I don't want to lose the power of listing and saying and sitting with and learning the names, especially those that are often excluded and attached to seemingly incomprehensible events. Even these painful lists and learning can and must be part of building a more broadly inclusive, truth-telling, and so we pray less violent culture.

But let's turn now to the other list I was *gratefully* holding yesterday, on the other hand, and as I was preparing this sermon. You just heard it. It's another kind of catalog entirely - a list of blessings. In the midst of *all* of those other records and recordings of infinite pain, Jesus offers us here a profound enumeration of different ways we are blessed. The Beatitudes! If you ask me, they are all about making a different kind of infinity comprehensible. Right out of the gates of his public ministry, at the top of his sermon on the mount, he declares them as if to make the infinite, unending, unfathomable depth of God's love real and relatable to anyone who's ever felt human pain, tragedy, and loss. That means they're for all of us! What is this list, exactly, and how are we supposed to receive it?

Let me share just a bit of biblical background to situate it. Matthew is, as ever, intent on drawing connections to Jewish scripture and fashions Jesus as the new Moses. Scholars often point out that Matthew models Jesus's Sermon on the Mount after Moses receiving the covenantal tablets on top of Mount Sinai. These are both moments of divine revelation! They are both epiphanies of Biblical proportion, literally. And notice another similarity. There are two lists! Moses brings down from on high the greatest "to-do" and "not-do" list of all time - the Ten Commandments! And apparently, we and Police Departments here in Cambridge, in Memphis and around the country still need to hear it. It says it clearly, right there: Thou Shalt Not Kill! Let's take the opportunity to recall that unequivocal instruction today. While we are it, let's set it forth as a foundational element for whatever urgently needed federal, state and local police reform and/or abolition legislation we may be calling for!

At the same time, if we move exclusively to lists of commands and demands, we may be tempted to roll *this* precious list of blessings right into another list of moral and religious instruction. Upon hearing the Beatitudes, I'm guessing we do it without even realizing, so conditioned are we to move to action! When I hear these blessings, I find that I instinctively focus on one, trying to figure out which of the blessings I or others need to be prompted to engage the most. "Have I been persecuted lately? No? I must not be doing enough! What I do I need to do?" Or "Have those legislators in Congress or world leaders been peacemaking enough? No, then go tell 'em what it's about, Jesus, and how far they are missing the mark!" The thing is...to try "*to do*" anything with these blessings misses the message itself! You see, the Beatitudes are not prescriptive. They are descriptive! No matter how much we try to locate our behaviors or those of others or turn it into a checklist of what to do at time likes this, if we are so searching and striving and comparing ourselves when we hear them, we will unwittingly forego their intended purpose and power, which is to *describe* and *make comprehensible* a God-given reality which already exists.

The beatitudes give exquisite specificity to how and where God's infinite love meets us, just as we are, and right where we need it most. Jesus, who was poor, meek, mourning, persecuted and mourning, lives out of their truth and provision right to the very end, even on the cross, that symbol of the world's infinitely incomprehensible brokenness, trauma and pain, that symbol of every state and system sponsored execution. Jesus somehow knows and never doubts that through whatever lists or stations of trials he may endure he already is and always will be blessed and beloved by God! We see his urgency, but it's never frenzied. We see him anguished but never anxious! Surely it is because he's already taken in the already-given blessing of God's love. Surely, he knows deep in his heart and trusts that God sees and comprehends his and the world's pain and loves us through it. The Beatitudes invite us to pause from our to-do's and striving and to take the truth and healing of this love deep into our bodies and souls!

It reminds me of the work of trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem, who I've mentioned to some of you before. He works with police departments and others around the country and teaches about the racialized

traumas we all carry in our individual and collective systems. He invites cops to do something counterintuitive, to *slow down*, in their very bodies, before they reach for the gun or baton. He trains them to pause and notice their own pain and trauma, if only for a millisecond. He talks about how we all have a tendency to “blow” what he calls our “dirty pain,” our unprocessed pain, into others, especially when things are heated. It’s the idea that “hurt people hurt people.” And we are all carrying way too much pain and hurt from our lives let alone from prior generations! So, he says: Pause! Notice! Check the system and check your body camera, yes. But check *your* system and *your* body! Check your pulse! Touch your heart! Feel the reality of your pain. Ground and resource yourself before you try to do or say anything! Pause and see what wholeness, solace, comfort, and healing emerge.

In this light, I wonder if we can take in Jesus’s list of blessings once more! Let them meet the hurt we are carrying this morning. Let them be a cleansing and clearing balm. Let them ground us in descriptions of who we and our neighbors already are, each and every one a *blessed* and beloved creature. Yes, these lines may speak to some more than others, given whatever circumstances. But today, I invite us to hear them as if every single line is for you and for me. If they don’t all land now, that’s ok but maybe trust that some part of you needs to hear it! Let them come to you. Let them speak into and touch that infinitely incomprehensible pain with the infinitely incomprehensible and unending power of God’s healing love and just mercy. Pause and let that love and solace emerge in and from you! And let’s hear this list, too, as the origin of an emerging community and culture of radical love and transformation, of a divinely and so rightly ordered world that is already embedded deep within us.

Ready? Deep breath? Feel your bodies! Notice in your heart where it hurts...

Where are you feeling poor, whether spiritually or materially ... “Blessed are you poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

Where are you raging and weeping? ... Blessed are you who mourn, for you will be comforted.

Where are you feeling silenced?...Blessed are you meek, for you will inherit the earth.

Where are you wanting more? ... Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you will be satisfied.

Where are you feeling tender? ...Blessed are you merciful, for you will receive mercy.

Where are you feeling whole? ... Blessed are you pure in heart, for you will see and know God.

Where are you feeling torn?... Blessed are you peacemakers, for you will be called children of God.

Where are you feeling pressed upon or in need of courage? ... Blessed are you who are persecuted. Blessed are you when people revile you and utter evil against you on my account.

Let's sit with these for a moment. Let yourself be embraced by the infinite and blessed reality of God's love that is already in you. May it emerge in us and through us! And may we rejoice and be glad for God's love is already ours! Amen.

