

“Looking for a Blessing”
Matthew 5:1-12

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There are weeks when the troubles of the world are pressing in so hard that it feels like all I can do to muster the energy to say, “Well God, what you have you got for us?” Come to think of it, that feels like a pretty good beginning of a prayer.

What have you got for us, God? What have you got for Tyre Nichols and his grief-stricken family? What have you got for anyone who has been impacted by policing and the racist system at its foundations who was retraumatized yet again this week? What have you got God for a nation who waits for body cam footage like it’s a movie premiere instead of tuning into communal grief in the aftermath of horrific violence both experienced and witnessed?

What have you got, God, for the city of East Lansing, for the public library, for the recent local Black youth who was told he “fit the description” so had to endure the humiliation of interrogation by police in front of his peers?

What have you got for East Lansing High School who is exhausted after a week of lock downs, cancellations, walk outs, and a growing mob-mentality that has risen up out of fear and rumors. What have you got for the youth who have been labeled *those kids* as in “what are we going to do about *those kids*?” Dr. Dorinda Carter Andrews reminded East Lansing this week that if we are going to be community minded we shouldn’t be thinking about my kids or your kids or those kids, we should be asking “What are we going to do for *our kids*? How can we work together to love on and support all of *our kids*?” This is a cry that echoes far beyond the city limits of East Lansing into all of our schools. What have you got, God, for our kids? What have you got for all of us?

This week, in each of these instances, I have been hearing calls for unity. We need to come together. We need to find solutions. We need to be unified on the way forward.

I sat in the auditorium at the Hannah Center on Friday night listening to community members share their concerns about the high school and lift up possible solutions. There was a whole range of ideas and passionate thoughts about what the way forward is, but it is clear that there was not unity in that room. There were different priorities, different philosophies and ideologies, different understandings of the current reality in the high school and what is needed to support our youth - all of them coming out of the broad diversity that makes up this beloved community. I heard a lot of ideas I agreed with and a lot of ideas I didn't agree with, but I certainly didn't hear unity.

When we throw up our hands and say, "what have you got for us, God?" I don't believe unity is what we will find there either. Because God is clear, through all of scripture, that God is oriented toward justice and peace and radical love. The beatitudes spell this out. The beatitudes are blessings. Beatitudes are not platitudes. They have sharp edges. They have boundaries. They point us in a specific direction which means there are other directions they are pointing us away from. The beatitudes are God's roadmap to help us orient ourselves in the direction of justice and peace. When we ask, "What have you got for us, God?" God's response is:

I have blessings for those who are poor in spirit. I have blessings for those who mourn. I have blessings for those who are meek and whose voices are silenced. I have blessings for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. I have blessings for those who are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers. For those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for those who are hated and persecuted and told lies about. God says, "I have blessings for you."

The Gospel of Luke has an addition to its beatitude blessings, the Gospel of Luke includes a part two that begins with *woe*. “Woe to you who are full when others hunger. Woe to you who are rich while others suffer. Woe to you who laugh while others mourn.” The woes are what God is leading us *away* from, what God is commanding us to leave behind. The blessings and the woes together ask us to move from *here*, where comfort reigns for some, to *over there* where justice reigns for all.

The power of the beatitudes is because of their specificity not their universal unity. When Jesus preaches these beatitudes, he is saying, This is the way to God’s blessings. This is the way of discipleship. This is where God’s collective care and compassion is oriented toward. It is a revolutionary proclamation to those who find themselves persecuted and reviled, those who are weeping in the aftermath of injustice, those who work with peace even when systemic peace is less popular than surface solutions. It is a reminder that God is with you. God is working alongside you.

And for those of us who are witnesses, who wonder how to speak up or how to respond, it is a reminder for us to follow the direction of God’s blessings. Orient ourselves towards the poor and the grief-stricken, seek out the merciful and the peacemakers and listen to them. When the nation or our community seems united in its response, that is our cue to get curious and start asking questions like: unified to whose benefit? Who is at the center of this response? Whose voices are being honored? Who is being comforted?

Austin Channing Brown has a quote she often turns to that says, “I am wholly uninterested in conversations about unity that are not grounded in the unrelenting pursuit of justice.” And whenever she shares that quote, people tell her that unity without justice is hollow or unity is impossible without justice. But she would remind us that more often, unity is found

with injustice. Unity is what happens when we align ourselves with what feels easy or comfortable, it is what happens when we align ourselves with racist institutions even to our own harm. Racism requires people to be united in order to stoke the fires of injustice and preserve the historic practices and policies that continue to play out across the nation and in our local communities. Channing Brown reminds us that not so long ago people were so united on the side of racism that they fought to divide the nation so that they could preserve their unity.

The work of justice, the work of being a living blessing in the world, requires us to un-align ourselves with the most powerful, the most insidious, the most pervasive evils in order to realign ourselves with those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who find no peace in the world as it is.

I picture Jesus taking his disciples up on the mountaintop. From there they can see everything below them, with much more perspective than when they are in the thick of the city or feeling the crowds press around them. From there they would have seen the places of power and who was gathered in them. They would have seen the wealthy neighborhoods and the thriving districts. From up on the mountaintop, as Jesus began to preach, I imagine him pointing and saying, ‘But look over there. Those people beyond the crowds. The ones in prison. The ones who are standing in lines, hungry and waiting to be fed. The ones who are on the edges of society, or deep in the shadows, the ones whom others are building walls to keep out. That is where our energy should be. That is the direction God’s love flows. That is where we are heading to serve, to comfort, and to empower. That is where God’s blessings are and where we are called to be a blessing. It took leaving the city, walking away from the crowd, going up the mountain to get a broader perspective for the disciples to see and follow.

That is what we are still called to do today. When it feels like the weight of the injustice in the world is closing in on us. When it feels like there is unity in how we are supposed to think or believe or respond. We are asked to step back from the crowds, seek a different perspective, look for the direction where justice and peace are flowing, and ask, “Well God, what have you got for us?” May it be so.