

Voir Dire
Matthew 5:1-16
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Honestly, I almost missed it. We get so much junk mail these days, so many credit card offers and magazine renewal notices, that the simple white envelope nearly made it into the recycling bin. But Will caught it and said, "You better open this. It looks official." I pushed through my dread, tore it open, and there it was: my summons to be available for jury duty for the period January 14th through 25th. I'd already tried deferring it; the jig was up.

The timing was not great. (Is it ever?) We at First UCC are, of course, in the midst of a big transition in our staffing model. As of this new year, Todd, our Senior Minister, has begun serving in the state legislature, and through June, will be here only a few hours a week on Sunday mornings. And Lauren, our wonderful new Minister for Faith Formation, has just started. In the midst of this, there have been special Sundays to plan, Annual Reports to compile, meetings to convene, urgent pastoral care to provide, and all other countless moving parts that go with the life of a busy, vital church.

So, an ideal time for me to potentially disappear for days with no cell phone contact.

Will tried to reassure me. "Remember when I was summoned a few years ago?" he said. "You just have to call in every night to see if you're needed the next day. I never even had to go to the courthouse."

"Yeah, I bet it will be fine," I said, immediately jinxing it.

Sure enough, the first week, my number came up and I had to report to the courthouse for jury selection for a trial, one that was estimated to last three days. Now, spoiler alert: I did not end up serving on the jury, but I made it all the way through the *voir dire* phase before being dismissed due to hardship.

"*Voir dire*" is literally translated as "to see, to speak." It is a legal term meaning "to speak the truth." It's the process by which the judge and attorneys question prospective jurors in order to gain a better understanding of each individual's way of seeing as well as how that person would fit into the potential group dynamic, the goal being to put together a fair and impartial jury ([source](#)).

(Lawyers in the congregation, bear with me; if I get any of this wrong, you can tell me all about it after worship.)

We prospective jurors would be asked questions about our professions and personal backgrounds, our connections to and interactions with the criminal justice system, and our willingness to accept certain requirements of jury service. And I sat there, contemplating how to answer the questions in a way that was truthful *and* also somehow communicated a total unsuitability to serve at this time as juror for this particular trial.

“We all have certain opinions and biases based on our life experiences,” said the judge. “If you are dismissed, please do not think that anyone here believes you are not a fair person.”

“We all have certain opinions and biases based on our life experiences.” I remembered those words as I read our Scripture this morning, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. You might say that this text is Jesus’ own *voir dire*, his own speaking the truth. Think of it as a new set of teachings from the new Moses. The beatitudes—the blessings—that Jesus offers in the first part of our reading are, well, biased. Preferential. The Beatitudes are unapologetically, whole-heartedly in league with the actual lived experience of the poor in spirit, the mourners, the merciful, and the persecuted: “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”

Is that really fair?

Shouldn’t the blessings be divided among everyone present, a perfectly equal amount of blessing for you and you and you? Why didn’t Jesus, still early in his ministry, try saying something like that?

“We all have certain opinions and biases based on our life experiences,” said the judge.

Jesus, born in a stable to parents with no safe place to call home. Jesus, a Jew born into a time of great social turbulence: civil war among Jewish factions in Palestine, Roman occupation, bloody uprisings. Jesus, who knew his history, knew intimately the suffering of his people across generations of enslavement and exile.

Jesus is presented as a new Moses, going up the mountain and offering a vision for how human beings should relate with God. But whereas Moses carries down the Word in the form of stone tablets; Jesus offers the Word in the form of himself, his own human body—a fragile vessel bearing God’s truth through time and space.

Jesus’ truth, his *voir dire*, is this: that there is more than enough blessing to go around, and the God of Israel is drawn like a magnet to the hard places, the broken places, the empty places. If you were to summarize all the beatitudes into one mega-beatitude, maybe it would be this: *Blessed are those who must depend on the grace of God.*

Depending on God’s grace is a lot more difficult than it sounds. I suspect that all of us, at one time or another, are more likely to lean on something else first: money, power, ego, sex, war, all those human things that we think will save us or make us secure.

Until they cannot save us or make us feel secure. Something happens in our own lives experience: a crisis or a loss or a trauma so profound that we realize that there is NO kind of power or privilege in this life that can ultimately save us from these devastations. But what remains is grace. What remains are blessings, even if we need to squint to see them. We might call this “faith,” or, even better, trust. Trust that in the midst of all that befalls us, there remains “beatitude”—blessing. There is something out there that loves us eternally.

And that blessing—that dubious, uncanny blessing—is exactly what Jesus is talking about, I believe. The German theologian Joachim Jeremias suggests that the Sermon on the Mount serves as an ethic in the face of catastrophe—a guide for how to behave toward one

another, and toward God, in hard times. We must treat each other as blessed. We must see each other as blessings. We must try, sometimes with all evidence to the contrary, to see all of life as a blessing.

One thing is for sure: Jesus' words are not meant for people who are just fine with the way things are, who are content with their lot in life. Jesus speaks to those of us who imagine another order altogether: Jesus' words do not—*cannot*—perpetuate the status quo. It is particularly sad, then, that these sayings of Jesus have in our present order lost some of their oomph. The beatitudes have become platitudes, going down easily, like bland food. We might hear this familiar text and think, “Oh, that’s nice.”

But the beatitudes are not “easy listening”; they are not meant as syrupy words of comfort. No! They are a code for the radical reordering of the world. What would the world look like if we actually lived out the beatitudes as truth? Such a world would be hardly recognizable. Sometimes it feels as if we are so estranged from God’s Kingdom, there’s no glimpsing it, not even briefly.

I think Jesus knew that. He knew that this reality he described could feel far, far away, impossible.

That’s why we have church. Not because the church *itself* is the Kingdom of God—that would be a big mistake to think that we have accomplished that — but because it is our shared enterprise, here, to keep trying to discern and make known God’s Kingdom to each other and to the world. “You are called to be salt and light,” Jesus says.

Salt, as we know, does two useful things: it flavors, it helps us taste, and it preserves. Through our relationships with each other, and our relationships with our neighbors, when we interact with each other in ways that are life-giving and healing, we can actually begin to *taste* God’s Kingdom breaking through into our world. And in a world of change, the church’s ‘saltiness’ allows us to hold up and help preserve the stories and values that have carried our ancestors of faith over the generations into our own.

And light—light, of course, reveals and illuminates that which is around us. Light helps us know what we need to know, so we can do what we need to do.

This church, our church, here and now, is in a season of change, but in the midst of all of it, certain things remain true. And so today I offer *this* as another kind of *voir dire*: Blessed are those who remember and treasure the story that tells them who they are, and why they live, and how to love and be loved, and what they can hope for.

That is how I would describe a church, our church, your church. In a time when truth itself seems easily manipulated, let’s remain steadfast and unapologetic when it comes to our shared values and our faith, wherever the Spirit may be leading us.

Amen.