

# **Mom! Mom! Mom!**

January 29, 2023

## **Union's Legacy**

In the 187th Annual Report of this church, I lift up the fact that Eric Goska, our church's Administrative Assistant, is an archivist at heart. Many of you know that he has been writing a statistical column about the Packers for years, and that this avocation of his has gained him access to exclusive content in the bowels of Lambeau Field. What you don't know is that he will often put those detective skills to work here at church, helping me to figure out what contractor we used on a particular renovation project decades ago and tracking down addresses for long-lost church members.

He also has a bit of a mischievous spirit. And so, at our staff meeting this week, he shared some of his digging. It seems he had been looking for a little historical "filler," a tidbit to take up some empty space in the bulletin. What he found was an article about our church that ran in the Green Bay Press-Gazette exactly one hundred years ago today. The article, titled, "Pastor Flays Low Morality of Society," is about a sermon by the Rev. T. T. Phelps, sharply criticizing intemperance, saying the consumption of alcohol is a "moral, not a political issue."

In one of the more florid quotes from Rev. Phelps' sermon, we read:

"Under the debasing influence of drink, a woman's speech becomes maudlin and her conduct immodest. Women who drink degrade the moral delicacy of their sex. It is a crime against refinement, a surrender to vulgarity, and a damnable Parisian vice!"

The staff all had a good chuckle, both at the linguistic style of one hundred years ago today as well as at my predecessor's attitude toward drinking. Don't get me wrong, we weren't making light of addiction, but rather the idea that chastising people from the pulpit was seen as a way to motivate change.

What I was intrigued by, though, was this church's legacy. Temperance and prohibition was one of the hot justice topics of the day in 1923, and this church made the news because we didn't shy away from taking it up. It wasn't popular in a lot of circles, but even one hundred years ago, this church had a long history of sticking our neck out over the social issues of the times. The Press-Gazette article quotes Rev. Phelps, "We must create real conscience on the greatest moral question of the day."

After Eric shared this article with the staff on Wednesday, I asked if I could have a copy, planning to work a quote or two into today's sermon, but to focus most of my time with you on the Beatitudes, the section from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which we read from the Gospel of Matthew today. What I didn't realize was that the video footage of five Memphis police officers murdering Tyre Nichols would be released on Friday.

The video is horrifying. Nichols was pulled over for driving recklessly on January 7. The video shows the police behaving aggressively with him from the beginning, and at one point, he runs.

The police pursue and proceed to beat him to death with their hands and batons, even kicking his face multiple times.

All of this KNOWING THEY'RE WEARING BODY CAMERAS. If ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one is watching, what is committing an atrocity when you know you're being watched?

Where Rev. Phelps named intemperance as the great moral evil of 1923, police brutality, particularly toward people of color, is our great societal failure today. I could have gone on with my original plan and invited you to contemplate how wrapping one's mind around Jesus' message:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit...  
Blessed are those who mourn...  
Blessed are the meek...”

is not only critical to following him, it also weaves its way through the life of our church. I would have stood here, proudly offering gratitude that all of us have come together to help one another live Jesus' way, a way that is very different from societal understandings of success, a way of mutuality and relationship and interconnectedness.

But then, the footage of Tyre Nichols' murder was released, and every human alive should be horrified by his cries:

“Mom! Mom! Mom!”

Cries that that woman will now have echoing in her brain every minute of every day for the rest of her life.

One of the most important things I've ever learned was from one of my mentors, Dr. Paul Wadell, who taught ethics at my seminary and who recently retired from the faculty at St. Norbert. He said, “There are some things that should keep us up at night.”

### **Our Faith**

Tyre Nichols' murder should keep us up at night. In the days and weeks to come, there will be endless analysis of his life. There will be endless attempts to pick apart his character and his behavior.

But the bottom line is that no one, NO ONE, deserves to be beaten to death. EVER. And especially not at the hands of those whose job it is to protect and serve.

We follow Jesus. The Bible is a compendium of story after story after story of people's experience of God as they face violence and tyranny and oppression and injustice. Of our faith, Rev. Anna Bladael writes: “Jesus, deeply tender towards those whose lives cried out for compassion...showed us how to live in a world where power is imbalanced and violence is common.”

Our whole faith is rooted in how to live in a world that has veered tragically far from God's purposes. Two weeks ago, as we commemorated the prophetic legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we read from the same chapter of the Gospel of Matthew as we did today:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

Our God detests our culture that has made toxic violence acceptable. The Hebrew scripture for this week is Micah 6:8. I chose not to have it read in worship, thinking that you've heard innumerable sermons on it already. But the reason you have is because that one verse is critical to the transformation of the world:

“This, o mortal, is what the LORD requires of you: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Those three commandments cannot be separated from one another. These rogue officers may think they're dealing out justice, but their so called justice is divorced from kindness and humility.

### **Conclusion**

I know that the footage of Tyre Nichols' murder is too repulsive for many to watch, I know that consuming such bile may not be good for your psyche. But, at minimum, I ask you to find an article about his murder, and read the comments. Get your blood angered up. Cry. Be so disgusted that you're unable to eat dinner. And then commit yourself to being about Christ's new and better way.

This is a long game, my friends. We're talking about transformation that is going to take teaching our children and their children and their children. This transformation will only happen when we all internalize that power and dominance and control, even when we're scared, even when we are hurt, cannot be the answer.

Bob Brezney, the guy who writes the new-agey horoscopes that are often syndicated in free newspapers, and who therefore is a rather unlikely person for me to be quoting from the pulpit, said it beautifully: “I want a heaven for my compassionate rage; a paradise to house my greed for justice.”

What do we do? You're not going to stop a cop's fists with your protest or with a letter to the editor. Well, at least not today. But protests and letters and conversations do change what society values and glorifies.

Just this Friday, Scott and I were out to dinner and heard the most amazing exchange. A woman at the table next to us used the n-word, and the server stopped her right in her tracks, saying,

“That’s not acceptable.” The offender tried to backtrack, saying, “It’s okay, I have black family members.” And the server simply said, “Nope. Not okay.”

I say this was an amazing exchange, because a server is usually not understood to be in a position of power. Depending on the management, she could have had hell to pay, even lost her job. But she took that risk for what is right, and in doing so, tipped the scales ever so subtly toward justice. I’ll lift up, too, that the management may very well have created a culture where the server knew she could do what is right. Scales tipped again.

So I beseech you:

- Read the comments.
- Get angry.
- Protest.
- Write letters.
- Get on the Police and Fire Commission so that you can be an influence on how police are trained and who gets these jobs in the first place.
- Speak up and speak out.
- Teach your children that destroying another is never acceptable.
- Teach them that by your example, because what they see is even more influential than what they hear.

As we step into our 187th Annual Meeting shortly, it is inspiring to me to know that our congregation has a long tradition of rolling up our sleeves and working to make a difference in the social issues of our day. My prayer for us this week is that we’ll all lose some sleep over police brutality. And that we’ll then get to work, making the Christ Spirit dominant in our lives and in all human relations.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**1 Corinthians 1:25-31, Matthew 5:1-12**  
January 29, 2023