

The Upside-Down Kingdom: Blessed are Those Who Mourn

Isaiah 61:1-4 2Corinthians 1:3-7 Matthew 5:4

Fall sermon series on the beatitudes. Learning to see as God sees; learning to see what and who God sees. And it's often the opposite (or it's upside down) from how the world sees, and *who* the world sees as blessed by God.

This morning's beatitude: Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted (Matthew 5:4). Our next reading is from the apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, and this is how the letter opens/begins:

2 Corinthians 1:3-7

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵ For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

This is the word of the Lord!

There is probably no experience that reveals more fully our ultimate lack of control, our ultimate dependency on someone greater than ourselves, than the experience of loss, and the mourning, or grief, associated with loss. Regardless of

whether our mourning takes the shape of intense sadness, or remorse, or even anger (which often masks an inner sadness), it reveals our vulnerability and sense of helplessness. In a way it overlaps with the first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” because like the poor in spirit, those who are truly mourning are in some ways at the end of their rope. And therefore, the restoration that brings true comfort and healing must come from the Comforter himself. Therefore, this beatitude is great news for those who are in grief—who are mourning.

Like I said last week, Jesus is taking an experience, and persons who are having such an experience, uncomfortable as it may be, and placing them in our field of vision to say, “See these people? They’re blessed. God sees them, I see them, and I want you to see them too.” And sometimes *we* are that person whom Jesus is placing in others’ field of vision, when we are in mourning.

Because in today’s beatitude, Jesus legitimizes a life experience that everyone goes through: the experience of **loss**. Not everyone *mourns*, though, unfortunately, when there is a loss, and some people work very hard at *avoiding* loss, or they just don’t *accept* loss. I’m going to make the case that accepting loss, and mourning it, is actually a necessary and vital human experience. Because a person who doesn’t mourn cuts themselves off from comfort. The blessing of comfort that God gives. And as we hear from Jesus, it *is* a blessing.

Some of us are *natural* criers, and some of us aren't. I worked with someone at a church years ago who said, "I cry at a hockey game, that's how much of a crier I am." Some of us cry easily and naturally, some of us don't, which is okay—there is no requirement to become a crier. But we have all had the experience of shedding tears over a loss. As physicians tell us, tears are good for us. Tears are therapeutic and healing, both emotionally and physically. Crying helps the body shed stress hormones and it stimulates endorphins. Weeping is a natural and essential part of being human. I'm not advocating that we should all cry more! I'm just saying, when tears come, they're good for us. Some did advocate for it, though...

In the very early church, in the second and third centuries as the church was trying to figure out its theology and what its practices would be, and what the sacraments would be (the Catholic church landed on 7 sacraments eventually; many protestant churches have 2: baptism and the Lord's supper) ... while they were still figuring all of this out in the earliest years of the church's formation, some of the early church leaders proposed that tears be a sacrament in the church. One of these ancient saints named Ephrem went so far as to say until you have cried, you don't know God. The thinking being, that we humans tend to try to construct our own perfect personal environment, a kind of bubble that will

insulate us against everything that is unpleasant. Yet in attempting to build this insulated environment we actually insulate ourselves against God, and our need for God, and the comfort that God longs to give us. Because there *will* be pain and loss in life, and we need the healing and comfort that God wants to give.

In addition to this, true mourning is an act of hope. It says that we care, we were invested. Someone, or something, mattered to us, and we have lost that person, or that personal possession or that experience that mattered to us. And we hold onto hope, and the faith that God will bless and restore and comfort us. Loss does not have the last word.

From the earliest days of God's people of faith, it was understood that sorrow is woven into the very texture of life. Along the journey of life, every human being experiences pain, disappointment, depression, illness, change, and bereavement. This is why the saints throughout the centuries, and today, speak of "the gift of tears." The gift of tears. They are a gift because the vulnerability that tears creates opens our hearts and invites God's presence and comfort. That's why the promised blessing is given that those who mourn will be comforted.

But tears of mourning seem ridiculous in a culture like ours which is so focused on diversions and power and toughness and acquisition—where it's all

gain and no loss. A culture where, when the going gets tough, the tough get going. And because of all this, we are a death-denying culture (or a death-*avoiding* culture at least), so this isn't always easy to talk about, let alone show or experience, especially in front of others. Crying is embarrassing to many people, and sometimes people will apologize for crying, even when they are grieving a real loss. But historically and biblically, there is nothing to be embarrassed about.

In Psalm 56:8, David says: "You (O God) have kept count of my tossings; you put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?" The prophet Jeremiah weeps his way through Jerusalem after it was invaded by the Babylonians. His reflections and weepings are called Lamentations. It's an important book of the Bible, not only for the wonderful content, but because it shows us what good grief really looks like.

There is no shame in any of the biblical characters about tears. Because they understood that difficulty and loss, and even death, were part of life.

We're not as comfortable with it today, however.

A Sunday school teacher once pulled me aside following a Sunday service when she had been teaching the kids. She said that one of the kids in Sunday school asked, "Is it okay to say the word "d-i-e" in church?" He didn't even say the word, just spelled it because he wasn't sure if it was a bad word or not. In some

ways that's an innocent question from a child. But it's been asked in other less direct ways by adults too, which reveals that the expectation at church might be that we're supposed to put on a happy face and not talk about such things; it's too negative. So in answer to the question, can we say the word "die" in church, the answer is Yes! Not only *can* we, we *have to*. If we can't say that word, then we can't say that Jesus died. That's a fairly essential part of the gospel, and of our faith!

Again, death is a reality. Not just persons and pets and living things, but also programs, and organizations, and so forth. There is a natural life cycle built into creation that includes death. But the good news, that we celebrate, is that death doesn't have the last word! The good news is that we are people of the resurrection, people of hope, because Jesus overcame death.

Yet, on the way to resurrection, we mourn. And so does Jesus, btw...

We see Jesus, in John 11, who had just told Martha "I am the resurrection and the life" after her brother Lazarus died... we see Jesus weeping at Lazarus' tomb. Jesus knew what was coming, that Lazarus would be raised, yet he mourned for him and for this family still. Because he loved them. And Jesus mourns with us, and for us, when we grieve. Because he loves us. Think about that...

I think my favorite scene of mourning in Bible, though, happened on Easter morning. It's Mary Magdalene, standing at the empty tomb, weeping. She is literally standing in the loss and the experience of it, fully. Everyone else has scurried away in fear, or had cloistered themselves somewhere trying to figure out what to do. But Mary Magdalene stayed in the place of loss and grief. She didn't run off; she didn't cheerily try to make the best of it; she didn't resist it. She dove into the mourning, at the site of the loss.

And what's beautiful about this is that because she stayed and mourned, she was the first to be comforted. She was the first to see the risen Christ and receive the news that he had risen. She became the first apostle to herald the good news because she stayed courageously in a place of experiencing the fullness of mourning. Had she not stayed there to take it in, she would not have received the comfort of the risen Christ appearing to her there, in that place.

Now, when we talk about mourning, it certainly means grieving the loss of a *person* who is near and dear, for sure. Yet mourning is a faithful and appropriate response to *any loss*, and the burden of grief we bear because of that loss. So we certainly mourn the death of a family member or a friend, and... we also mourn a loss of changes in our life situation or our health. We mourn the loss of beloved pets. We can also mourn on behalf of others. I'll come back to this in a moment.

And, we can mourn over the state of affairs in the world today, and our country. A proper—and in my opinion *needed*—response to the unnecessary and awful deaths from gun violence, for example, and our seeming inability to do something about it, is to mourn and lament—which, when done, can lead to hope and action. We should *all* mourn about things like that. We also mourn the loss of civility and honesty among elected leaders; we grieve over the divisions in our country and the systemic racism that continues to circulate through our culture like a virus, and especially among white Christians in leadership who blame all of our country's ills on non-white people.

We, as a country, and we as God's people, need to mourn and lament. We can't just stay angry; or indifferent. We grieve, because it means we care; we're invested. We grieve, and then... we do something. We do our part. We'll talk about that when we get to "blessed are the peacemakers." For today: blessed are those who mourn; who bear sorrow and grief.

When Martin Luther translated the Bible from the original Greek into German, he took the Greek word for mourning and translated it in the German bible as "Leidtragen" which means "sorrow-bearing." That is a solid translation because it can indicate anyone who is carrying sorrow of some kind, not just for themselves but for others, or for the world. It's something that is carried, the

same way that a person might carry a picture or keepsake of someone or something they care about in their purse or wallet. They carry it with them.

So, I like this translation from Luther because bearing sorrow doesn't necessarily mean that *we're* crying, or outwardly manifesting grief. Maybe someone else is, and perhaps we are carrying it on behalf of others, or, along with them. Or, after our tears we continue to bear sorrow for our own loss. It's just there. It doesn't just go away like that. And sometimes it sneaks up on us when we least expect it; many of you know what that experience feels like.

So, therefore, bearing sorrow can easily coexist with an outwardly joyful life. There is something to be said for the beatific truth—the blessed truth—that the deepest joy often resides in persons who also carry the deepest sadness. Somehow, and I can't explain it, many people who carry sorrow also have deep joy. Spiritually, it's just one of those realities that sorrow, when carried well, often leads to joy. Or they coexist, comfortably.

It makes me think of good, classic, blues music—originating from African spirituals, working songs, and chants, which came out of slavery. Blues convey a sense of longing and sorrow, while at the same time, exuberance and joy. Joy and sorrow. And hope.

I like Luther's translation of this word as 'sorrow bearer', also, because it points to Jesus, the 'man of sorrows' who bore our sorrows on the cross. This is the promised comfort. Better put, Jesus himself *is* our comfort. Remember, he promised us the Holy Spirit whom he called "the comforter"—in Greek, "parakletos," which, by the way, is the same Greek word for "comfort" in the beatitude: blessed are those who mourn, for they will be "parakletos"—comforted—Holy-Spirited!—and this Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the risen Christ, who bore our sorrows on the cross, and who continues to bear our sorrows. That is part of our comfort.

The promised blessing for those who mourn is "...for they shall be comforted." God will show up, with comfort. This is the wonderful imagery from Isaiah 61, that the coming savior would provide comfort: a garland to crown the head instead of ashes (one of the signs of intense grief), the oil of gladness for mourning (here they are, together; joy gradually replacing mourning, though they coexist), a garment of praise instead of a spirit of heaviness. God will intervene.

God intervenes directly, through the Holy Spirit, according to Jesus' promise. And divine intervention also comes through other people, God's people who come alongside us. Especially those who have previously experienced loss and pain and grief, as it says in 2Cor.1: God comforts us in our sorrows, and then

we can comfort others. This is how it works in God's economy: nothing from our lives goes to waste, including our losses and pain. God doesn't promise a pain-free life, or a life free from sorrows, but *in the midst* of our pain and sorrows God comforts and heals us so we can be the blessing of comfort to others. The Comforter in us, reaching out and comforting others.

Not *cheerfulness*; that's not the same as comfort. Jesus didn't say "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be cheered up." But, "they will be comforted." Consoled. Embraced. Walked with. Not left alone.

Comforted—by Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, by God's people. That is our comfort.

Here, also, is our comfort: In the book of Revelation, at the end (21:3-5) when God has won the final victory and defeated all the forces of evil, John sees the vision of the new heaven and the new earth, and as he sees this magnificent vision, he says:

"³And I heard a loud voice saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said,

“See, I am making all things new... Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

This is what we look forward to, and long for, and therefore this is what we strive for now—heaven on earth in terms of comfort and hope.

For those sorrow-bearers, who carry a burden in this life—whether it’s a personal loss or bearing other’s burdens, or struggling through physical ailments or depression, or the burden of our human frailty and failures, know that one day all will be well. In the famous words of 14th century saint Julian of Norwich: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

Let’s sing: It is Well with My Soul