

## BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN

Text: Matthew 5:4

Revelation 21:1-4

LHUMC 2/23/14

Beatitudes Series #3

- I. Introduction—like all of the beatitudes, how you take this one depends on what’s going on in your life.
  - A. Carol Merritt tells this story about an encounter she had with this beatitude: “I’m sitting on the couch with my laptop open, holding my phone in my hand, when I read Jesus’ words. I’m waiting for my mom to text me, as I scanned through this list of all who are blessed. Some of them are the most unlikely characters: the poor in spirit, the meek, the contrite, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst to be good and upright people. Those who are abused...”
  - B. Blessed are those who mourn—those six simple syllables seem to stand up straight off the page and the letters—they have their hands raised—and they are begging for my attention. I’m in mourning, and for the first time in my life, these are not benign words of hope that should be written in pastel letters on a religious bereavement card. But they’re alive, they’re active, they’re audacious and bold. Blessed are those who mourn.
  - C. My blood begins to boil at the outrage of these words. I think of war-torn streets or a mother burying her child. I think of parents dying and leaving their babies too early.
  - D. How could Jesus say that there is any sort of blessing in this emotional upheaval? How could Jesus call that person who has aching grief seeping into her joints until she’s paralyzed with exhaustion, blessed?
  - E. I know my reaction comes from my particular circumstance, as I stare at these words on my laptop screen. Even though I’ve been a pastor for a dozen years and even though I have preached these very words at funerals, they sound differently today.
  - F. My father’s in hospice care. As I read, he’s about to go into surgery...He’s disabled and his whole body is so worn that there’s a serious question about whether he will survive this whole ordeal...And so I’m here, pacing the floors, obsessively checking the phone in my hand...and I’m feeling that painful, paralyzing sorrow—

that mixture of anger and frustration—that becomes so acute when we feel powerless. That’s when these words travel to me. Blessed are those who mourn.

- G. Why would Jesus have the audacity to say this? Where is the blessing in this raw open wound? Is the blessing upon those who mourn simply hinged on the future hope that they will be comforted? Or is there, somehow, a blessing in the midst of it? Is there some blessing in the grief and the sadness that washes over me? ([www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org), January 31, 2011)
- H. She asks some good questions—questions we have probably all asked at times when the words of this beatitude are “begging for our attention”. Times when we have been in a face-to-face relationship with what it means to be in mourning and are feeling anything but blessed.
- I. And to begin with, our answers to those questions are based on the fact that Jesus knew about grief and mourning.
  - 1. He was surrounded by people who were broken and hurting, who knew what it was like to lose a child, to lose a way of life, to lose meaning in life beyond simply trying to survive every day.
  - 2. And he knew it himself—did you know that the only time in the scriptures that Jesus cried, it was at the death of his friend Lazarus? (John 11—a powerful story of Jesus raising someone from the dead, but before the raising, there is mourning.)
- II. Last week we talked about how there were a couple of different definitions of what it means to be “poor in spirit”. Today, as Jesus leads us to the topic of mourning, the same may be true. But what they have in common is that all mourning is a lament over something that has been lost.
  - A. There is personal mourning.
    - 1. This kind of mourning is when we lose things in our own lives.
      - a) Could be the loss of a loved one to death.
      - b) Could also be the loss of someone close to us to something else—addiction, Alzheimers, or simply distance. Those of us who have recently become empty-nesters can relate to that one.
      - c) It could be the loss of a job or a relationship.

- d) Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson in *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs* identify six major kinds of loss that we can experience in our lives: material loss, relationship loss, intrapsychic loss (the loss of the possibility of “what might have been”), functional loss (the loss of some neurological or physical function of our bodies), roll loss (loss of our place in a social network), and systemic loss (when we lose something within a system that we are in). (Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983. pp. 36-46.)
  - e) And we all have perhaps experienced all of those types of loss that lead to mourning at various times in our lives.
  - f) So these are examples of mourning at a personal level.
- B. And then there is also what you could call “communal mourning”, which you find a lot in the Old Testament.
- 1. For example, in Isaiah 61, a passage that Jesus obviously knew and was even referring to as he spoke these Beatitudes, the prophet speaks God’s word to a people mourning the loss of their city Jerusalem to the Babylonians.
  - 2. And what he says to them is that eventually, God will “comfort all who mourn”—the same words that Jesus uses in this Beatitude.
  - 3. And so when we see things on the news that have happened elsewhere that upset us or drive through neighborhoods in our own city and feel grief, what we are feeling is this kind of Old Testament “communal mourning” –where we all mourn together for the plight of our society and our world.
  - 4. And we can feel as powerless and as in need of comfort at those times as we do when whatever it is for which we mourn is something that is ours alone.
- C. So the point here, and Jesus’ point here is that as we travel life’s journey, times of loss and mourning are inevitable.
- 1. And be aware that the scriptures as a whole do not deny the reality of mourning.
  - 2. Did you know that the word “mourn” appears in the Bible no less than 137 times? (I know, because I looked it up)
  - 3. And perhaps the most well-known instance of the word “mourn” other than in today’s passage is that verse from Ecclesiastes that

states emphatically the inevitability of mourning—“There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven:...” “A time to mourn and a time to dance.” (3:1, 4)

4. Jesus could have chosen to leave out this beatitude about mourning, but he knew that not only was it relevant to those he was talking to that day, but that it is just as relevant to us today.
5. In adding it to his list, he too was saying that “there is a time to mourn and a time to dance.”

III. So if that is what it means to be in mourning, if there is that much to this emotion, and it is so inevitable for us, what about the second half of the beatitude, what about the promise that Jesus makes that in those times, we will be comforted?

A. The first thing to remember is that Jesus is being very Biblical here also—that this is far from the only place in scripture where God’s comfort is promised to those who mourn.

1. I referred already to Isaiah 61, where God tells the people through the prophet that in the midst of the loss of their city, and their nation, and their way of life, that He will comfort them in their mourning.
2. And speaking a little later when the people had been exiled to Babylon, God promises to Jeremiah 31 “I will turn their mourning into gladness, I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.”
3. And then speaking in a much later time to a church that was experiencing persecution, Paul says in Romans 8 “For I am convinced that neither death nor life,...nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
4. And then in the final story and vision of the entire Bible are the words that we heard from Revelation 21 that when the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven in the end times, God will wipe away the tears from our eyes and there will be no more death, suffering, crying, or pain.
5. I remember learning in writing classes that you’d better end your story with your main point, with the “moral of your story”—so if that’s the case with the Bible, the moral of the whole story is that God will comfort us in our mourning.

- B. As I've pondered this beatitude this week, the other thing I'm realizing is that of all the beatitudes, and all of their promises, this may be the one in which we are called to live out the second half of it more than any others.
1. Some thirty years after first reading that book *All Our Sorrows, All Our Grievs*, I've never forgotten one short passage in there that says this: "Bearing the griefs of others is not optional for the Christian who embodies Christ's compassion for the world. Our love for all humanity and for our particular neighbors compels us to stand beside them in their grief." (p. 167)
  2. Paul says the same thing in Romans 12 when in the midst of a long list of things that Christians are supposed to be and do, there are these instructions: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn." (12:15)
  3. So if we are called to be the comforting presence of God, if we are to be the ones who are to "mourn with those who mourn", what are the implications of that?
    - a) The answer to that question begins with the realization of how our culture tends to view mourning.
      - 1) My impression is that there is this sort of unspoken commandment out there that we are to sort of treat those so-called "stages of grief" that you've probably heard about like hurdles in a race—and what's best for us is that we get over them as quickly as possible.
      - 2) But any of us who have been through any kind of mourning know how difficult that can be, and how guilty we sometimes feel if we aren't "winning the race" or if we're tripping over some of the hurdles.
    - b) When Jesus speaks of the comfort that is promised here in the future tense ("they will be comforted"), he is not just speaking of the future reality of the kingdom where we will all experience God's eternal and lasting comfort, I believe he is also giving us permission to be in mourning in the here and now for as long as it takes. To know that it may take a while to fully experience God's comfort, and that's okay.
    - c) And if that's true, then the implications for us as God's comforters to those who mourn are important.

- 1) “To mourn with those who mourn” might mean that instead of saying things to people who are mourning like “I know how you feel” or “there must have been a reason for it” or “it was part of God’s plan”—all of these platitudes designed to get people over the hurdles as quickly as possible so we feel better, instead we perhaps just sit with them and be quiet. There can be tremendous comfort simply in our presence.
- 2) Perhaps we bring them a meal.
- 3) Perhaps in some other small or even unspoken way we simply give them permission to take as much time as they need.
4. As I’ve been reading all of these Biblical examples of God comforting those who mourn, I’m realizing that God’s promise to those who mourn cannot be summed up by the phrase “get over it”, but instead it is about God’s promise to be with us for as long as we need and beyond.
5. If we get nothing else out of this beatitude as those who mourn and those who are called to be God’s agents of comfort for others who mourn, maybe in the end, that’s it.
6. Maybe in the end, that’s the blessing in all of this.

#### IV. Conclusion

- A. This poem/story by the blogger Andy King sums up our role as Christians as those who have known mourning and at the same time, have answered the call to be agents of God’s comfort.

“The grieving widower sat at the restaurant table. His wife of 43 years had died the previous week. The young couple at the next table were strangers to him, but somehow they reminded him of happiness he and his wife shared.

The widower signaled to the waitress. The bill for the couple’s meal was delivered to the widower’s table.

On a napkin he wrote a note. He told of dining alone for the first time in 43 years. He wrote that paying for their meal would put a smile on his wife’s face and make him happy, too. And he wished them a happy new year.

*There was the kingdom of heaven.*

For blessed are the merciful, the meek.  
Blessed the peacemakers, the pure.  
Blessed are those who mourn  
Yet whose ongoing love  
Comforts themselves and others.  
And blessed are those whose joy  
in doing right creates  
nourishment in this hungry world.

Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

They are the kingdom of heaven.

<http://earth2earth.wordpress.com/2014/01/27>

When we are mourning, ours is the Kingdom of heaven. When we are God's agents of comfort to those who mourn, we are the kingdom of heaven.