

Comfort and Laughter, or,
What is Blessed About Mourners?

Matthew 5:4; Luke 6:21b; Romans 12:14; Revelations 21:1-5a

As I began my work on this series of sermons on the Beatitudes I remembered the worst sermon I've ever preached.

I had just come to Asheville to be the pastor of Beverly Hills Baptist. I was about 30, and this was my first pastorate after school. There was a big outdoor city-wide youth rally being planned. About 400 young people in the city were expected to be there. The main preacher of the night was supposed to be Bobby Richardson, the former star second baseman of the New York Yankees. He had to back out of the engagement, and the planning committee had to find a last-minute replacement. "We'll ask the new young preacher in town", they said. I had dreamed of pinch-hitting for the Yankees second-baseman, but not like that. With a little trepidation I said yes.

As the service began I saw that the warm-up act for the sermon was Paul Anderson, the "World's Strongest Man." He had won the title at some point, been born-again, and was now on the revival circuit. He began to demonstrate, picking heavy things up and interspersing his testimony. Then came the finale. He would

lift up a heavy wooden platform on his back, and to add to the difficulty he unexpectedly asked me to climb on top of it—which I dutifully did, in suit and tie, up on the platform. Up I went, the young people applauded.

It was now time for me to preach to the crowd of adolescents first warmed-up by Anderson. I went to the lectern and began my carefully prepared 10-page typed sermon on...The Beatitudes! “Blessed are the poor-in-spirit, the mourners, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart.” I knew I was bombing with the first words. I think I preached it even faster to get it over with.

Today’s beatitude, the one from Matthew and the one from Luke, is about the mourners of the world being blessed. In Matthew’s version they are blessed with comfort; in Luke’s’ version they are blessed with laughter. Both are states of blessedness, both are gifts of God and evidence of grace.

I

“Blessed are those who mourn”, Jesus said, “for they will be comforted.” It has a riddle-like quality: “Happy are the sad.” How can this be?

For most of the history of the church the interpretation of the beatitude has centered on one being sorrowful for one’ sins. Not surprising for the church obsessed with the topic of sin. There’s a saying: “To a hammer, everything’s a nail.” For the church, everything’s a sin to be forgiven.

I do believe that true sorrow for one's sins and the damage they have caused makes our confession real and the comfort of God's forgiveness real. But I won't dwell on this dimension today. The church has dwelt on it overmuch.

II

A second interpretation of that beatitude is, one probably closer to what Jesus had in mind, the sorrow of loss. There are all kinds of loss. Life is a succession of losses. The loss of a pet, a parent, a job, the loss of one's health, the loss of a spouse, a beloved, a dear friend. A character in a T.V. movie, "The Last Convertible", says: "Life is completely fair. It breaks everybody's heart." Yes, sooner or later, it breaks everybody's heart. But God comes to comfort us in our loss. The New Testament word for comfort, *paraclete*, means to "stand alongside." God comes alongside us. The English word comfort means to give strength. So God brings strength, and God comes alongside as we grieve.

The poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote:

Where you used to be, there is a hole in the world, which I find myself
walking around in the daytime, and falling in at night.

This is the sorrow of loss. But the sorrowing ends, your broken heart will mend. The hole will be there, but you won't fall in. As scripture says, "Weeping may

tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Ps. 30:5b). We may think it will last forever, but comfort is on the way.

III

But here’s another kind of mourning. It is a mourning for the world and for all who mourn because of the madness, cruelty and indifference of the world. It is the mourning of those who hunger and thirst for justice. I saw a photo this week, of a row of Jewish men praying at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, a holy place where Jewish women and men come to pray for others and for the world. The men were praying at the wall, their prayer caps on their heads and each draped in the Ukrainian flag.

This is the mourning of love, love for others, love for the world. It is the mourning that is a form of compassion and leads to action. Clarence Jordan who founded the inter-racial community Koinonia Farm in Georgia and translated the New Testament into southern English in his “Cotton-Patch” translation, says of this beatitude: “So the mourners are really those concerned to the point of action.”¹ Paul says, “Bear ye one another’s burden, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). In this way we become God’s comfort to them. Paul begins one letter:

Blessed be...the God of all *comfort* who *comforts* us in all our afflictions, so we may be able to *comfort* those who are in any affliction with the *comfort* with which we ourselves have been *comforted*. (II Cor. 1:3-4)

Someone in the church might have said, "I think he likes that word." Again, the Greek word is *paraclesis* which means to be called alongside, to *be* alongside, a comfort in suffering we all need. We the mourners comforted by God become God's comfort to others. In this way the blessing of God's comfort has become also a calling.

We grieve the suffering of those crushed by the systems of injustice and sin in the world, and we plunge ourselves into the world to come to their aid.

This kind of mourning proves that we are spiritually alive, not dead.

IV

Luke's version of the beatitude brings a surprising turn: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Laugh! Laughter is a form of blessedness.

Laughter is the gift of God amid our heartbreak and the brokenness of the world. It is a healing gift of God as it releases endorphins in the body which ease our discomfort and bring pleasure to body mind and spirit. Proverbs 17:22 is dead on:

A cheerful heart is good medicine,
but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.

Merry-heartedness is a gift of God's grace. One writer said, "I'm tired of the fine art of unhappiness." We can cultivate a merry heart.

Some kinds of laughter are not from God, some forms are cruel. Sarcasm means literally "to tear the flesh." But God's laughter is kind-hearted. It is our gentle laughter at our own human folly and foibles. A.A. meetings are filled with laughter and jokes. Here's one. A woman asked another woman, "How did your husband die?" She replied, "Cirrhosis of the liver." The first woman said, "Did he ever go to A.A.?" The woman replied, "Oh it never got that bad."

God's laughter is also joy at another's good fortune. Not only are we "to weep with those who weep", as Paul urged, that weeping with another itself a form of comfort, but we are "to rejoice with those who rejoice." We do this every week at Sunday prayers with our celebrations and concerns.

But there is another form of laughter. Frederick Buechner calls it the "gospel as comedy". Tragedy, he says, is about the *inevitable*. When we are watching a tragedy unfold, in a movie or in real life, we have a sense of foreboding and dread because we sense everything is going to end badly. But comedy, he says, is about the *unforeseeable*. It is about the happy ending we

cannot yet see. It's about the surprise of joy. Good jokes are funny because you don't see the punch-line coming.

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The Bible ends with the glorious vision of a world redeemed. Life is the Divine Comedy. Despite how things appear, God will make all things right. Love wins, and all shall be well.

John saw this vision: God will dwell with us and we with God. God will wipe away our tears, and death will be no more. And the one on the throne says "Behold I make all things new." This is true for heaven, but the gospel is also about heaven's coming *now*, God wiping away tears, making all things *new*.

We laugh because we know what is coming, an ending better than anything we can imagine, better than anything we could make happen. It makes a difference to know how it all ends. I love to watch a re-run of a basketball or football game when I already know we've won. The mistakes and penalties seem unimportant now because we won the game. David Buttrick, preacher and professor of preaching says:

For if God's story will end in a world reconciled...with "the sound of them that triumph and shout of them that feast", with the City and the Lamb and wiped-away tears, then all our stories must be revised.

It is the Final Rejoicing, and it is the joy Jesus bequeaths to us now!

The playwright Eugene O’Neil wrote a play based on the raising of Lazarus in John’s gospel. The play’s title is *Lazarus Laughs*. In the play when Lazarus is raised from the tomb, he begins to laugh. He laughs because when he was dead those four days he glimpsed the world to come, the death of death and the “eternal laughter of God.” The more he laughed, the younger and stronger he became. Scripture says “the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). It is the energy of *joy* that is changing the world. It can be ours, the blessedness of laughter.

A rabbi, a priest and a minister walk into a bar. We already begin to laugh. It is the laughter of God.

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1. Clarence Jordan, *Sermon On the Mount* (Valley Forge, Judson Press, 1970),23.
 2. Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (San Francisco: Harper&Row Publishers,1988), 29-30.