

Heartbreak: Blessed Are Those Who Mourn

Matthew 5:4; Isaiah 61:1-4

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February 7, 2021

Dear friends, it is good to be with you here this morning even if “here” has taken on a new meaning. I look forward to the day when “here” means “here” – physically being in the same space. And I look forward to that day when we can see each other smile again and not try and guess facial expressions from behind masks; and when we can sing together and laugh together. That day is coming, and I want to say how grateful I am that while we are still in the midst of this pandemic you are choosing to care for each other, attend to public health, and contribute to the common good.

I am guessing we have all seen them, the commercials with Dr. Rick the world-renowned Parenta-Life Coach, the counselor who wants to keep us from becoming our parents. Does his satirical advice occasionally make you a little uncomfortable, like maybe you really do have too many pillows on the sofa, or you remember that time when you really were talking on your cell phone using the speaker in a public place? Maybe you remember this particular segment. “Do we really need a sign that says, ‘To Live, Laugh and Love?’” No! Then he disposes of it. How about “No fussin’ No cussin’ and No backtalk?” You know, that could come in handy in the bishop’s office on occasion.

Sometimes the Beatitudes can seem a little like those inspirational quotes we hang up around our houses, well-meaning and helpful, but perhaps a little removed from the rough and tumble of our daily lives.

“Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.” Hmm. Maybe another translation. “Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad” (CEB). “Blessed are the sorrowful; they shall find consolation” (REB). Does promised relief from grief or sorrow really make that condition blessed? Comfort will come but that in itself feels like cold comfort.

Grief, mourning, sorrow in the face of loss. When I pondered this beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted,” when I let my mind wander with it a bit, here are some of the images that came to me. I remember my Uncle George’s funeral. George was fourteen years older than my mother - his sister. His children were then significantly older than me, and I did not know these cousins well, but I vividly remember George’s son, my cousin pound his fists angrily on his father’s coffin. Mourning wrapped in anger.

I remember being outside in a cemetery in Northern Minnesota. I was the pastor at this funeral and the man whose body was going into the ground was a veteran. His brother Jerry was my parishioner. Taps were played and as a folded American flag was handed to Jerry, I watched as he wept openly – his whole body shaking. Mourning. Grief.

I remember coming into a funeral home as the pastor who was going to officiate at the service. I turned the corner into the room where the service was to be held and my breath was taken away. There was the tiny coffin of the infant girl who had died and whose funeral this was. Mourning. Grief. Sorrow.

I recall more public images and voices. Though I was only four when John Kennedy died, the images of his funeral and our country's public grief have been played often enough to be part of my psyche. I can see John, Jr. salute and picture Jackie dressed in black. I have been to the place in Dallas where President Kennedy was assassinated.

I can hear Ted Kennedy's voice crack as he eulogized his brother Bobby as "a good and decent man who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it." Mourning. Sorrow.

I see the image of planes flying into the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, and there is tremendous sorrow. I see the image of George Floyd, with the police officer's knee on his neck. It is an image that evokes strong anger, and it evokes deep and profound sorrow that something like that could happen in modern America. Sorrow. Mourning.

I see the image of the United States Capitol building being stormed, windows being broken, calls for the hanging of the Speaker of the House and the Vice-President. Those images evoke anger as well, and also deep and profound sorrow.

We grieve, we mourn when there is loss – death, of course; but also other kinds of loss, a loss of a measure of hope, perhaps. We grieve, we mourn with others even when the loss is more theirs than ours.

Novelist and essayist Joan Didion wrote about her life following the sudden death of her husband. *The grieving have an urgent need to feel sorry for themselves. Husbands walk out, wives walk out, divorces happen, but these husbands and wives leave behind them webs of intact associations, however acrimonious. Only the survivors of a death are truly left alone. The connections that made up their life – both the deep connections and the apparently (until they are broken) insignificant connections – have all vanished.... I am dropping my keys on the table inside the door before I fully remember. There is no one to hear this news, nowhere to go with the unmade plan, the uncompleted thought. There is no one to agree, disagree, talk back. (The Year of Magical Thinking, 194-195)*

Mark Twain lost a daughter suddenly when she was 24. He wrote about the immediate impact of the news. *It is one of the mysteries of our nature that a man, all unprepared, can receive a thunder-stroke like that and live. There is but one reasonable explanation of it. The intellect is stunned by the shock and but gropingly gathers the meaning of the words. The power to realize their full import is mercifully wanting. The mind has a dumb sense of vast loss – that is all. (Judith Viorst, Necessary Losses, 238-239)*

Among the emotions and reactions that accompany grief can be: intense pain, yearning for the deceased, emotional numbness, bitterness or anger, avoidance of reminders of the loss, feeling alone or detached from others, emptiness and meaninglessness, difficulty in pursuing plans. When experienced disproportionately, one can be diagnosed with "persistent complex bereavement-related disorder" (Svend Brinkmann, Grief, 154-155). In spite of some theories of rather neat stages – anger, denial, bargaining, depression and acceptance, grief is often messy, and sometimes not, which makes it even messier. In a poem, Linda Pastan writes: "Acceptance. I finally/reach it./But something is wrong./Grief is a circular staircase./I have lost you." (Viorst, 246)

We can say many things about grief, about mourning... but blessed? Perhaps. Psychologist Svend Brinkmann argues that grief is a “foundational emotion that is constitutive of reflexive selfhood in a relationship to love and death” (30). It is part of what makes us uniquely human (29). The philosopher Martha Nussbaum puts it this way, “grief expresses love’s importance in one’s life and is a testament to that attachment and to one’s own nature as a person who cherishes such attachments” (Aging Thoughtfully, 132). Grief is part of what makes us uniquely human, and our capacity to grieve and mourn deepens our humanity. It reminds us of some of our most important capacities.

Grief reminds us of our capacity to feel. In a passage in her book The New American Spirituality that I have held near for a long time, Elizabeth Lesser writes: *A happy heart is one that is larger at all times than any one emotion. An open heart feels everything – including anger, grief, and pain – and absorbs it into a bigger and wiser experience of reality.... The opposite of happiness is a fearful, closed heart. Happiness is ours when we go through our anger, fear, and pain, all the way to our sadness, and then slowly let sadness develop into tenderness.* (180). Grief is one of those experiences that can enlarge our heart.

Grief reminds us of our capacity for tenacious hope. We grieve where we are in our national life. Progress has been made on racism, but long, difficult work remains as the killing of George Floyd and too many others reminds us. We grieve that our democracy is as fragile as it is, demonstrated by the rocky transition of power following this last presidential election which included an effort to subvert the election. Yet out of these, hope remains. We are inspired to continue our racial reckoning. We are moved to strengthen our democratic practices. Hope is tenacious even when it is caked with mud.

And as we’ve said once already, grief reminds us of our capacity for love. Listen to the first and last stanza of a twelfth-century poem:

‘Tis a fearful thing
To love
What death can touch.
To love, to hope, to dream,
And oh, to lose....

‘Tis a human thing, love,
A holy thing,
To love
What death can touch.

I encountered this poem in a book by the author and therapist Francis Weller, The Wild Edge of Sorrow. In that book Weller writes: *While it is difficult to embrace grief and be moved by its muscular demands, without it we would not know the heartening quality of compassion, could not experience the full breadth of love, the surprise of joy, we could not celebrate the sheer beauty of the world. Grief fosters each of these capabilities* (9).

Perhaps we should take our cue from the poet Rilke.
*How we squander our hours of pain.
How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration*

*to see if they have an end. Though they are really
seasons of us, our winter –
enduring foliage, ponds, meadows, our inborn landscape,
whose birds and in-dwelling creatures are at home.*

(Original version of The Tenth Elegy; Mitchell, The Gospel According to Jesus, 159)

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. There is more here than one might at first imagine, more here than an inspirational framed quote to decorate a hallway. Why explore this now? What has this to do with the larger theme of your series on the place of the church in the post-election United States?

I would respond in one way by saying that this wisdom is for every time and every circumstance. As human beings, if we dare to love, dare to care, we will know grief. The purpose of the church is to share the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ and part of that good news is about making and keeping human life human. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ, a Jesus follower, is to know a grace that allows us to experience the full range of human emotion and to grow our hearts and souls larger. Grief hurts, and we need not be paralyzed by it. We need not avoid grief, but can offer it a place, a place that is also an affirmation of that which makes us human, our capacity to feel, to dream, to hope, to love. The world needs the church as this kind of humanizing institution. I will say more about this in just a minute, but first I want to introduce another dimension of grief that might allow us to call those who mourn blessed.

Grief work is part of the work of the church to make and keep human life human. One part of that work which we've not yet touched on is the church's prophetic work, speaking into our wider world from the perspective of our faith in Jesus Christ. Here the work of a significant contemporary prophetic voice has been of great help to me.

In a 2014 book, Walter Brueggemann writes about "three urgent prophetic tasks" – reality, grief and hope. Grief as a prophetic task? Brueggemann is profoundly insightful about prophetic tasks. He argues that there are forces in our world that work to deny painful social realities that seek to turn our gaze away from the way the world isn't working for too many. Prophetic work is to break through the denial of injustice, break down the narratives that hide our difficult history, unmask the pain of the world, and shine a light on all the ways the world is not what God dreams for it. Brueggemann: *The prophets employ many varied rhetorical strategies in an attempt to break the denial.... There is much righteous indignation, that is, indignation that is voiced in the service of righteous solidarity with the vulnerable. I have come to think, however, that our usual assumptions about prophetic righteous indignation are overblown and mistaken, both because such speech is not seen as a rhetorical strategy rather than an unrestrained tirade, and because there are many other rhetorical strategies utilized as well.* (57). Grief, mourning, lament is another prophetic strategy to call attention to the pain of the world, to the way the world is not working for too many, to highlight neglected parts of our history, to shine a light into the gap between the world as it is and the world as God dreams and desires it to be. A profound prophetic task of the church right now as we seek to make and keep human life human in the name of Jesus Christ and as we pursue God's dream for the world in the name of Jesus Christ is grief, mourning, lament.

Beyond the importance of grief as a prophetic rhetorical strategy, Brueggemann argues we need to give voice to our grief or it comes out sideways. *That loss touches every dimension of our*

common life is too painful to acknowledge. It can only be talked about around the edges, because the characteristic tone of public discourse among us is, perforce, upbeat, buoyant, and optimistic.... But... sadness over loss that is unvoiced, unembraced, and unacknowledged a) turns to violence and b) precludes movement toward new possibility. Sadness unvoiced leads to violence whether expressed in racial bigotry, hostility toward outsiders, readiness for attack on enemies, or self-hatred. Sadness unvoiced leads to a backward wish for recovery; as a result no energy is left for the pursuit or practice of new social possibility that lies beyond our old comfort zones.... The prophetic task... is to encourage, permit, and engage the practice of public grief over a world that is gone. (81-82). My apologies for such a long quotation, but I find this profoundly insightful as we think about mourning and grief being blessed as we navigate the world as the church in this time. What if the church could do ministry out of heartbreak, heartbreak for the way the world isn't working and heartbreak for the difficulty of change, even when change is desperately needed? What if the church offered space for public sadness, a sadness and mourning and grief that enlarged our public heart and soul just as grief has the capacity to enlarge our individual hearts and souls?

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. To mourn is to be blessed not only because we become more human as we mourn – deepen our capacities for feeling, for hoping, for dreaming, for loving, enlarge our hearts and our souls; and not only because grief allows us to break through denial so that new possibilities for justice, peace and reconciliation might emerge; but also because as we mourn we open ourselves profoundly to the God of Jesus Christ who surrounds us with grace. As alone as grief might move us to feel, always present in the shadows of our souls is the God who, in the words of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead “is the great companion, the fellow-sufferer who understands” (Process and Reality, 532, old edition). It is God who accompanies us in grace so that in our mourning we are never alone. It is God who accompanies us in by grace our grieving so that we will not come apart, as devastating as our grief may feel. It is God who accompanies us in grace so that our broken hearts can be mended, not wound more tightly but mended so they have extra room. That's how God binds up the brokenhearted. If we can befriend our grieving, our mourning, personal and social, we can encounter in deep and profound ways the grace of God. If we can befriend our grieving, our mourning, personal and social, we open our lives and our world to new possibilities by the grace of God.

Francis Weller who is among those upon whose work I've already drawn once said in an interview: *The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That's how much gratitude I can give. If I carry only grief, I'll bend toward cynicism and despair. If I have only gratitude, I'll become saccharine and won't develop much compassion for other people's suffering. Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible.* (The Sun, October 2015)

Blessed are those who mourn – grief and gratitude. Hearts stretched large, broken even, broken hearts but broken open to new life, new possibilities, a more profound experience of God's grace. God in Jesus Christ calls us to be large-hearted people, people of profound humanity, people of tenacious hope, people of deep love, people of new life and new possibilities, people who can see all there is to grieve, who invite others to lament and who yet remain people of profound humanity, tenacious hope, new life, new possibilities, and most of all of deep love.

Blessed are those who mourn. God grant us grace to be so blessed.