BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN

Receiving & Extending Comfort | The Attitudes (Pt 2)

Text: Matthew 5:1-11; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

How many of us know what an “oxymoron” is? For those who haven’t had to take the SAT’s yet, an oxymoron is a coupling of words that seem to contradict themselves when put together. For example: Act naturally. Found missing. Deafening silence. Larger Half. Or Seriously funny. At first glance, the Beatitudes of Jesus can easily seem oxymoronic. What in heaven’s name is the word “blessed” doing alongside words like “poverty,” “mourning,” or “persecution”? There is no accident in this, of course. Ever the Master Teacher, Jesus very intentionally slams these apparently contradictory words together to get our attention – to shake us up and wake us up to the very different way of being, thinking, and doing – in short, THE ATTITUDES – that will characterize those living in the gracious, godly way that Jesus calls, the Kingdom of heaven.

As we learned last week, part of our struggle to understand Jesus comes from the fact that the word “blessing” has often been misunderstood or trivialized in our society. The word we translate as “blessed” (makarios, in the Greek) literally means = “favored.” The Beatitudes are a list of the kind of people whom God favors – as in has a particularly warm heart towards and a readiness to extend help. The problem is that we (like Jesus’ original hearers), have this tendency to equate “favor” with some kind of smiley-faced, gold-wrapped, Instagramable picture of health, wealth, luck or prosperity. As Dallas Willard writes: We have fractured and misled and corrupted the meaning of “blessed” to suggest that when life is “good” it means God is favoring us, and when it is hard that we must be doing something wrong and God is punishing us.

But, if you take nothing else from this series, be sure to grab this: It’s when we’re in the midst of the mess not the marvelous that God favors us. It’s in those times when we’ve come to the end of our selves, and our plans, and our ability to control and command... it’s in those times when we know that we just can’t succeed or even stand if a grace from beyond ourselves doesn’t enter the picture and act on our behalf... it’s in those circumstances where our hands unclench and we turn them upward toward the heavens that God blesses us with his presence, his power, his provision, his favor. And this is why it is not just the poor in spirit but also those who MOURN who are blessed, who attract God’s favor.

Mourning isn’t something any of us wants to purposely seek out, do we? And yet it comes to us all. As children, maybe we lose some special toy, or suffer through the death of a beloved pet, or stand staring into the casket of a grandparent, struggling to take in the immensity of what has happened. Perhaps in our youth, we have our heart broken by some attractive boy or girl; or we don’t make the team or the play; or we fail to get into the school we so wanted. Some of us know what it’s like to lose our job or our home and whatever sense of identity or financial stability was associated with it.
Others of us have lost children or spouses or the prospect of having either. Many of us have shed tears as we watched the kids fly from the nest or had our newly-grooved lifestyle disrupted when they boomeranged home.

With the passing years, loss becomes a larger, more consistent, more undeniable part of our lives. We realize with the writer of Ecclesiastes that: "To everything there is a season" (Eccl 3:1). And seasons come and go. We say goodbye to the technology or TV programs or traditions that framed a life we cherished and understood. We lose our professional position, our physical looks or stamina, our best friends, and often our memories. Aren’t you glad you came to the Happy Church today?!

Past a certain point, people aren’t always quick to honor those who mourn. A bit of sniffling, an honest tear or two is certainly OK. But, before long, we’re told in one way or another, that it’s time to move on. So we deny or try to rise above our feelings. If you must continue to grieve, please go in your room and do it alone. We’re encouraged to quickly replace what’s gone with something new and move on. We get the message from a dozen directions that there’s always some product, person, substance, or activity you can stuff in the hole that loss leaves behind. Again and again, we’re told, that time heals all wounds. Just wait awhile and you’ll feel better.

But that’s not how Jesus (or the Bible as a whole) views mourning or recommends we deal with it. The first thing to remember is that mourning is the appropriate response to genuine loss. In the opening chapter of the Bible we read that "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (Gen 1:31). Even though sin has tainted and disfigured the creation in deep ways that require redemption, there is still a persevering goodness to the world that God has made and to lose any part of it, as we all do at various times and in so many ways, ought to inspire grief. Mourning is a measure of meaning. The size of our sadness is the size of the sweetness of what we had in our hands and had to let go. In fact, sadness and tears are one of the most sincere ways that we express to God that we actually GET how good his gifts are. It’s one of the reasons why God favors those who mourn instead of just move on.

For this reason, the second strategy commended in Scripture for dealing with our grief is to embrace our pain rather than deny it when we’ve lost someone or something precious. As we saw when we studied the story of Lazarus, even though Jesus knew that his friend’s story was going to end well, “Jesus wept” (John 14:11) over Lazarus’ depth and the pain this caused him and his loved ones. As some of you know from experience, tears are among the most cleansing and healing things we can do in the face of pain. Is there a loss you need to name and grieve?

Thirdly, from a biblical point of view it is better to review your loss rather than rush to replace it. As a pastor, it’s my privilege to spend time with a lot of grieving people. When I first meet with families after they’ve lost a loved one, they are often eager to get on with the funeral preparations, to sort out the details, to get through the tough
days ahead. I usually insist that we gather around the living room or table and tell stories instead. I ask the people to review the details of the deceased’s life, the influence he or she had upon them, the memories they will carry with them as a continuing source of wisdom or strength in life. The sharing starts as a trickle, then becomes a steady stream, and finally a torrent. And, by the end, a very remarkable grace has filled their mourning and they confess to feeling hope. Think how often the Bible calls us to remember what the Lord your God did in your past, as an encouragement for your future. (Deut 7 & 8; Psa 13:5-6).

It has been my experience and, more importantly, the counsel of Scripture, that there is also a blessing for those who choose to mourn in community rather than alone. In her brilliant book, BRAVING THE WILDERNESS, author Brene Brown, writes of a strange gathering she participated in on December 15, 2012 -- the day after twenty six-and-seven-year-old children, and six adult staff members succumbed to a reign of terror at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut:

“Our kids were first graders. Their kids were first graders. The pain, horror, and fear were unfathomable. We gathered for no other reason than to be with one another. We didn’t come together to make sense of what had happened in that school so far away from our own because we never, ever wanted it to make sense. We sat crying in silence, our small group of neighborhood mothers, some friends and some strangers, who had felt compelled to be together.

I remember thinking, Maybe if all the mothers in the world crawled on their hands and knees toward those parents in Newtown, we could take some of the pain away. We could spread their pain across all of our hearts. I would do it... I’ll take my share. Even if it adds sadness to all my days. I My friends and I didn’t rush to start a fund that day. We didn’t storm the principal’s office at our kids’ school asking for increased security measures. We didn’t call politicians or post on Facebook. We would do all that in the days to come. But the day right after the shooting, we just sat together with nothing but the sound of occasional weeping cutting through the silence. Leaning in to our shared pain and fear comforted us.

Being alone in the midst of a widely reported trauma, watching endless hours of twenty-four-hour news or reading countless articles on the Internet, is the quickest way for anxiety and fear to tiptoe into your heart and plant their roots of secondary trauma. That day after the mass killing, I chose to cry with my friends, then I headed to church to cry with strangers.”

The Apostle Paul says that one of the most important ministries of God’s people will be to “Mourn with those who mourn” (Rom 12:15). It’s not that this is the only thing we do. We are called to take action to cut away the roots of injustice, cruelty, and heartache. But the first thing Christians are called to do in the face of tragedy or
travesty is to **bear one another’s burdens**, to try to take on some of the weight of others’ grief, and **so fulfill the law** [the pattern] of Christ (Gal 6:2).

I remember sitting in the Riverside Church in New York City many years ago, shortly after a young gay man had been lynched in another state. The pastor had traveled to attend the boy’s funeral. He said that he’d been the only person of self-avowed Christian faith there. He said he couldn’t understand why there were not more of us there. "You didn’t have to agree with this young man’s lifestyle to be there. You just had to be against murder and hatred. You just had to care for the pain of that family."

Where, I wonder, would God want Christians to show up in greater numbers these days? You and I may not know what do to SOLVE the losses our friends or neighbors are suffering. We may feel clueless or powerless to know how to best or permanently address the ravages of racism or the violence going on in our cities or the #MeToo stories emerging in our times. But I bet you and I know how to grieve that something tragic, for whatever reason and with whatever solution, has gone on.

Let me be bold to say that this ATTITUDE – this orientation toward standing compassionately with others in their pain, regardless of their party, race, gender, sexuality, age, religion, ethnicity, whatever, is among the most important acts of witness needed from Christians in our time – not because it is easy to do this or politically-correct to do this – but because it is LIKE GOD to do this. The Apostle Paul once wrote to the Corinthian church: **Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, SO THAT WE can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. (2 Cor 1:3-4)**

When Jesus says in the Beatitudes that those who mourn will be comforted he uses the Greek word, *paraklethesontai*. It’s a word whose root is the same as the term Jesus uses for the Holy Spirit. Jesus said to his disciples: **I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever. (John 14:16)**. What this means is that we can trust God to help and heal us rather than expecting time to heal all wounds. The Holy Spirit will come alongside of us and strengthen us in the midst of our losses. And out of this experience of his favor, we can stand with others.

In chapter 40 of the Book of Isaiah, God makes this same promise to bring comfort to the nation of Israel as it is enduring a very painful season of exile. The passage ends with these famous words: **Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. (Isa 40:30-31)**

John Claypool was a young Baptist pastor who found inspiration in these assurances as he walked through the cancer diagnosis, remission, and death of his eight-year old
daughter. My colleague, Dave Bianchin, summarizes Claypool’s insights as follows: “Sometimes God grants us wonderful, soaring spiritual experiences. We feel His pleasure and His strength. Those are wonderful times, and we celebrate them. Sometimes God gives us the strength to run and not be weary. These are times when, in terms of our faith, we can really get things done, and life in general seems pretty smooth and we are accomplishing a lot. These are to be celebrated, too. But, sometimes the greatest miracle of God, the greatest show of His power and evidence of His care for us, is when, in the midst of trials, tribulations and, yes, mourning, He gives us the power [simply] to walk and not faint.”

I don’t know where you are on the journey right now – soaring high or just struggling to crawl, but this I pray for you: I pray that God will give you the freedom to mourn your losses in the way I’ve described today. I pray that you will be strengthened by the fact that because of his Holy Spirit and those around you, you are never alone. And I pray that each of us will take this comfort with which in some measure we have been comforted and extend God’s favor to comfort those in any trouble. Not because I say so, but because Jesus says that is one of the THE ATTITUDES of the people of the Kingdom of heaven.

Let’s pray...

---