

Series: Discovering the Heart of Christ
Today: Blessed are those who Mourn

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, February 17, 2008 (Second Sunday in Lent)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

On this second Sunday in Lent, we move to the second item on the agenda of ministry that Jesus Christ gave us in the Beatitudes: *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.* If you missed last week, just a brief reminder that we are focusing on the Beatitudes during Lent because our new Vision Statement states that our goal is to *Discover the Heart of Christ in the Heart of the City*, and we believe that the heart of Christ is revealed in his agenda for ministry in the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5-7. The Beatitudes are at the beginning of that sermon, and you may recall that last week we said that the word in the original Greek for blessed in each of the first 10 verses is literally translated “happy.” The Hebrew word for blessed means “on the right path.” So what we have this morning is a strange juxtaposition of words. Jesus is saying you will be happy if you mourn; you will be on the right path if you feel the depth of sorrow which comes in the grief process.

How can one be happy and sad at the same time? It is like oil and water. The two simply don’t go together. It reminds me of the Valentine Day story someone told me about the fellow who was proposing to his girlfriend and wound up with a less than enthusiastic response. He got down on his knees, and he said, *“Darling, I love you more than anything else in the whole world, and I want to marry you. I am not a wealthy man, but I promise you will never want for anything. I don’t have a BMW, or a nice house, or a yacht like Johnny Green, but if you will be my wife, I will be the happiest man in the world.”*

His girlfriend was quiet for a moment, and then she responded, *“Henry, I love you, too, but if you don’t mind, I would like to hear more about Johnny Green.*

There’s a man who found out what it means to be happy and sad at the same time.

Most commentaries agree that the word which Matthew uses for mourn is the strongest word he could have chosen for grieving in the original Greek. It is a word used in association with death; the passionate lament of one who is grieving the loss of someone they dearly loved. It is the kind of sorrow which brings not only an ache to the heart, but it also brings inconsolable emotion in the body: the tears, the sobbing, the audible gasps struggling for control.

The word Matthew uses is *penthos*. It is found only ten times in the New Testament. Five of those times are in relation to tears over the loss of a loved one, and the other five are related to sadness the believer experiences when he/she acknowledges his/her sin or separation from God.

On this second Sunday in Lent, I want us to think about the meaning of this beatitude in both contexts: 1) *Happy are you (you are on the right path) when you mourn the loss of someone you love, for there you will find the comfort of others and the comfort of God.* 2) *Happy (you are on the right path) are you when you are deeply sad about your separation from God, for you will be forgiven and find in a new relationship with God where you will be comforted.*

Mourning the Loss of Those We Love

In the United States of America we are not all that comfortable with the deep sadness which comes from the loss of those we love, are we? We admire composure,

restraint, control in the face of death, and when we encounter the emotion which comes naturally with grief, we are at odds with ourselves.

I got my first glimpse of another way of grieving during my seminary training which I have never forgotten. As part of a class in pastoral care at Princeton Theological Seminary, I was required to spend a night on call as a chaplain at the Presbyterian Hospital in West Philadelphia.

About 3:00 a.m. I was called to the Emergency Room to be with an African-American family who was grieving over the death of a woman in her early 60's; the matriarch of the family. As I walked down the hall, I could hear wailing and moaning and crying the likes of which I had never heard before. The nurse in charge told me it was the family and informed me that it was my responsibility to get them to be quiet. I figured that since she was a nurse and I was a rookie chaplain, she must know more than I did, so I approached the family with the idea in my head that it was my job to keep them quiet.

I went to the family and found that all the noise they were making was because the staff had told them they could not see the dead body of their mother. I checked with the nurse, and I got permission, and as we entered the room where the body of the woman lay, the wailing and the moaning started all over again. I was 23 years old and from a family where I had learned that emotions like that were inappropriate. I thought my job was to put a stop to the crying. So I moved to escort the family from the room, and as I did, the son of the dead woman picked up a chair and held it high above his head, and shouted, *"If you don't let us do what we need to do, I will kill you right here and now. I mean it. I will kill you."* Needless to say, I decided to let them stay.

I took that experience back to my professor, and he was quick to help me understand that what that family did was far healthier than the control of emotions I learned in my family. Clinical studies of grief have actually shown that people who are able to express their feelings of deep loss openly, without restraint, are able to recover from the loss more quickly than those who feel they need to keep their emotions in check.

Biblically, there is precedent, as well. When Paul wrote to the Romans about suffering, his phrasing reveals that he believes there is a process we must go through to get to a healthy resolve of grief in our lives. He says that suffering teaches us endurance—how to hang on when everything feels hopeless. If we learn from the time we spend with suffering, we will develop a depth of character which can only come when we don't run away from things that are painful. It is character which produces hope, and that hope does not disappoint us, says Paul, because that is when we discover the presence of God in the midst of our pain.

William Barclay has noted that sorrow does two things for us: It shows us the kindness of human beings. It also shows us the comfort and compassion of God. Barclay writes, *“Many a person in the hour of sorrow has discovered depth of personal comfort as well as the true meaning of life. When things go well, it is possible to live for years on the surface of things; but when sorrow comes, we are driven to the deep things of life...”*

To be comforted means to find strength or encouragement. It is only when we allow ourselves to find the depth of our sadness that God can use it to change our lives. When we allow ourselves to feel deeply, the meaning of the word mourn, when we embrace the deep feelings of loss and ask God to move us through our suffering, gives us

endurance, and we learn from our pain, then we discover the character which Paul was talking about. We receive a new understanding of ourselves and a new sense of strength.

Unhealthy mourning leaves us sad and depressed because we feel like we simply cannot go on without the presence of the one we loved. Healthy mourning allows us to find a new strength and a deepening of our character. In the words of the poet,

I walked a mile with Pleasure, she chatted all the way
 But left me none the wiser for all she had to say.
 I walked a mile with sorrow, and ne'er a word said she.
 But, oh the things I learned from her when Sorrow walked with me.

You will be happy (you are on the right path) when you mourn, for you will find the support you need from others and a deepening of your own inner being.

Our Separation from God

Five times in the New Testament, mourning is used in reference to death. An equal number of times it is used to refer to the profound sadness believers feel when our sin, our own self-interest, has separated us from God. You can see the root of the word penitent in the Greek. It is that sense of mourning which comes when we know we have done something which moves us further away from the relationship that God wants to have with us and that we want to have with God. When we read the beatitude from this perspective, it might sound different. *You are happy (on the right track) when you feel sad about the things which keep you separate from God. It is only then that you can receive the comfort of God's grace and start over.*

Most of us don't like to think about the things which keep us separate from God. We don't like to be reminded of our shortcomings. I am reminded of a friend of mine who began his sermon by saying: *There are three points I want to make today: 1)*

Because people are not serious about their relationship with God, the world is going to hell; 2) Most people don't give a damn about that; and 3) If you are more concerned that I just used the words "hell" and "damn" than you are about what is happening to the world, you need to get serious about your relationship with God."

Until we can feel deeply about some of the things we see going on in the world, we are at risk of repeating the same mistakes over and over again. Until we can grieve over our involvement in a war which seems to have no end, we may find yet another place to involve ourselves. Until we can mourn the loss of life in Kenya since the elections, until we are deeply saddened by the senseless loss of life, we may yet do it again. Unless we are deeply saddened by the violence which took place at Northern Illinois University on Friday, we are in danger of having the same kind of violence repeat itself again and again. Until we are willing to personally mourn the things we do which separate us from God—our pursuit of wealth, power, and prestige at the expense of relationships; our willingness to make things like pornography, alcohol and drugs the filling for that god shaped hole in our lives; our fear that we are all alone in the world and that God will not care for us—until we are willing to mourn these things, we will fall prey to them again and again.

John Grisham is one of my favorite writers and he tells the story of a defining moment in his spiritual journey. It came several years after graduating from Mississippi State University, when one of his classmates in law school told John he was terminally ill. Grisham asked him: *"What do you do when you realize you are about to die?"*

The friend replied, *"It's real simple. You get things right with God, and you spend as much time with those you love as you can. Then you settle up with everybody else."*

It is only when we are willing to mourn our separation from God that we are able to receive the gift that God wants to offer us. God's grace is free, but it is not cheap. The sacrificial death of Jesus Christ is the price he paid so that we might know the breadth and depth of His love for us. It is that death and the power of the resurrection that restores us to a right relationship with God. It is only as we mourn the things which keep us separate from God that we are prepared to receive the gift of the grace God offers.

Conclusion

You are happy (you are on the right track) when you mourn—when you allow yourself to feel the loss of someone you love and do not run away from it; when you are deeply saddened by the things which keep you separate from God. You are then prepared to receive the grace of God in a way you may have never experienced it as God restores you to right relationships with others and with him.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.