

Close to the Heart of God: Blessed are those who mourn...
Isaiah 61:1-4, Matthew 5:4
First Presbyterian Church
January 21, 2018
Beatitudes Series

Isaiah 61:1-4

61The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

Matthew 5:4

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Sermon

I read this week of a Presbyterian Church in Kansas that speaks together the benediction each week at the end of their service. Here's what they say... they say: "God's love welcomed us to this time of worship. But now that same holy love sends us out into God's beloved world that is beautiful but broken." Now that same love sends you out into a world that is beautiful, but broken.¹

From very early on – since the time of Abraham and Sarah – God decided that the world needed people to love the world even when it is broken. And at least since the days of Pentecost, these people who are called to love the world even when it is broken have included the church. God decided he needed a church to love the world and pray for the world and invest themselves in the world... to bless the world... even when it is broken.

The brokenness is everywhere... witnessed in so much human suffering. If you dare to look, you know this is true. For the longest time, I thought that suffering was an aberration to normal life... an infrequent exception to the rule. I thought a normal human life was a life of health and happiness... comfort and ease? I no longer see it that way. I have come to understand that suffering is not an aberration. All people suffer. All people grieve. All people know what it is to cry through the night and to have your dreams dashed and your heart broken. It is a universal spiritual struggle.

And not only have I come to believe suffering is no aberration, but for Christians... having compassion for the world – suffering in, and with, and for the world – is a part of our calling. There is something essentially Christian in having a broken heart... and I think this is what Jesus

¹ Village Presbyterian Church in Overland Park, KS.

is saying here in this beatitude – and that coming near to the heart of God will always yield a broken heart.²

Of course, as with all the Beatitudes, just how a broken heart is a blessing will need some explanation... because each one of us knows what it's like to have your heart broken... to be weighed down with grief. And needless to say, it does not feel like a blessing at all.

So, what does Jesus mean... blessed are those who mourn? Well, it's like you pack your elementary-aged children into the minivan... and you set out to drive eight hours to the beach for vacation. You know the destination will be beautiful and the vacation will be great fun, but right then all there is an all-day car ride which to elementary age kids seems to be an unbearable injustice, if not torture. So, before you get even 15 minutes down the road, one of them is already asking, "Are we there yet?" You have no doubt had that car ride. "Not yet," you say, "just seven hours and 45 minutes to go." Ten minutes later: "Are we there yet?" "No, not yet." And so, it goes hour after hour after hour.

If I understand this Beatitude... it is saying this: Those who are truly blessed are those who look at the world as it is and know we are not there yet. The world is not as it should be. People are not as they should be. You and I are not as we should be. The world is broken. People are suffering... and not just generic people but people we know and love and care about. When we know the way, the world is supposed to be, and we see the way the world is... well, it breaks your heart. And Jesus says, "Blessed are those who know we are not home yet, for they will be comforted."

Read it a different way and it says: Because the world is broken, we are not supposed to be comforted now. As followers of Jesus Christ, we trust his promise that comfort will come, but we cannot be a comfortable people now. Not yet! We who trust in God's coming kingdom... we who long for justice and peace... we who yearn for healing and human flourishing we KNOW the world is not as it should be... and it breaks our hearts. We pay attention to those who suffer... we suffer ourselves... and we mourn... as God mourns. And because we mourn as God mourns, Jesus declares us "blessed."

That day... when Jesus spoke of "those who mourn" I imagine he struck a deep chord in those who were listening, a chord of loss and hope that reverberated back through many centuries. Some may have heard the music of Isaiah's prophecy – the words John read earlier: The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to comfort all who mourn;³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion - to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.³

When Jesus declares "blessed are those who mourn" he calls to mind this and many other promises... promises so beautiful they bring tears to your eyes just to listen to them... promises so extravagant that no one but God could fulfill them... promises that had been made, but had not yet come through.

² Rev. Tom Are, Jr.. *Blessed Are Those Who Mourn*, Village Presbyterian Church, November 13, 2016.

³ Isaiah 61:1-3

So, the people mourned about the distance between the promises and the way things were... and they insisted that God is not yet finished... that there is more yet to come.⁴

A few years back, Jack Nicholson won an Academy Award for the movie “As Good As It Gets”. He played a talented writer who is plagued by obsessive-compulsive disorder. In his effort to maintain control in his own life, he creates casualties all around him. He is rude, testy, completely unattractive. He has no friends and wants no friends. And one day he barges into his psychiatrist’s office without an appointment and when his doctor won’t see him, he rants at the other patients in the waiting room, howling at them the question: “What if THIS is as good as it gets?” Those who mourn... close to the heart of Jesus... know that this is not as good as it gets. So, they look for something better... not because they are just naturally optimistic people but because they have heard the promises of God... they remember the promises of God... they put their hope in the promises of God.

Which brings us to the second half of Jesus’ beatitude: “they will be comforted.” They will be comforted, Jesus says... and I just want to take a moment to bless all of you who hear this and then throw yourselves in this Kingdom work of comforting those who mourn. Bless you Stephen Ministers who sit with folks on their mourning bench... Bless you elders and deacons who show up at the funerals of those you don’t even know well just to testify to the truth of Jesus’ words. Bless all you who will call somebody up and say, “I am so sorry, we lost a child, too.” And bless you who will put an arm around shoulders saying, “I can’t possibly imagine how you feel right now, but if you’d like to tell me I would be willing to listen.” Bless all of you who make comforting those who mourn YOUR business... your responsibility... your ministry.

Bless you... but understand please, that Jesus is talking about vastly MORE comfort than you and I can possibly share with one another. The people who first heard this sermon would have understood this immediately... but you and I need a little Bible study to get art it. You see, to us “...they will be comforted” sounds perfectly lovely, but also, perfectly impractical. OK, when precisely will that comfort come? How exactly will it work? Well, what the folks who were there that day knew... and we don’t... is that the grammar here employs what is sometimes called the “divine passive tense.”⁵

As a good Jew writing to a majority Jewish church Matthew is very hesitant to speak God’s name. Whereas we put God’s name on bumper stickers and t-shirts, out of awe and respect Matthew will not even use the name of God so that here, in the Sermon on the Mount, he speaks of the fulfillment of God’s plan by using the “divine passive” – they WILL BE comforted. How will this happen? The people KNEW what he was saying: God is going to do it... God will accomplish this comfort... and using the elusive understatement of the divine passive Matthew announces the grandest truth he knows: God will heal the creation. God will make right all that is wrong. God will not allow our world to hurt this way forever. God will wipe every tear from their eyes... mourning and crying and pain will be no more... when the first things pass away. They will be comforted because God will comfort them and much more.⁶

⁴ Rev. Dr. Patrick Willson in a sermon preached to the Williamsburg Presbyterian Church, February 3, 2002.

⁵ M. Eugene Boring in the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, p. 179.

⁶ Willson.

And until then... until that day... the comfort Jesus offers is himself... his very Holy Spirit... given to his people... so that when they mourn, they might be near him.

Listen:

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you.

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.

I do not give to you as the world gives.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.⁷

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ John 14:25-27

I remember a conversation with a church member some years back. It had been a hard week. Something had happened to put our nation's racial issues back in the news and I had mentioned it the previous Sunday in worship... and a group of church members was talking about the situation and I remember someone saying, "I just don't know why we have to talk about these things in church? When I come to church I just want peace. I want to leave those things behind. I want some sanctuary when I come into this sanctuary."

I get that. I really do and sometimes we need that. There are times when I'm reading the paper or watching the news and I just want to look away. I can barely stand to keep looking. But what are Christians supposed to do on a Sunday morning in worship after a young child in our congregation is diagnosed with a terminal illness? Or when an adolescent's extended battle with an eating disorder threatens to rip apart a family? Or when an otherwise upstanding member of the community is shown to be an unrepentant perpetrator of domestic abuse? Or when an earthquake, flood, or tornado wreaks havoc in the lives of neighbors down the street or across the continent? Or when a barrage of suicide bombs threatens to undo peace in the Middle East? What happens then?

Ann Weems died last year.

Some of you may have heard of Ann Weems – she was a Presbyterian elder and was often called the Presbyterian "poet laureate." She died last year leaving a best-selling collection of lament poems. The reason for writing these laments... the pivot point of her pain... was an unfinished, unanswered, unresolved grief for her beloved son, Todd, who was murdered the night of his 21st birthday. She was a poet before that tragic night... but after Todd's death she needed all the faith and words she could muster to honor the pain written deep in her life.

In his Foreword to her *Psalms of Lament*, Walter Brueggemann writes, "... the life of the world is saturated with pain and ache not yet finished, not yet answered, not yet resolved. And we are left with the demanding question, 'What shall we do with so much of hurt that is left unfinished?'"⁸

His answer is that we shall speak it. Like our ancestors before us in the synagogues... and like Ann Weems... we speak our lament to the God who we believe can do something about it... we do not pretend that all is well, but articulate our mourning to the One who promises comfort. *Lament is the language of mourning which is brutally honest about how things are yet completely trusting in a future that will be*

This is the language of Moses and Rachel and Jeremiah and Job.
It is the language of more than half of the psalms in our Bible.
It is the language Jesus used as he mourns over Jerusalem.
It is the language our Lord borrowed as he hung on the cross

⁸ Walter Brueggemann in the foreword to Ann Weems' "Psalms of Lament" p. ix

When in our worship the conventional songs of praise seem shallow... when late at night when all is quiet and the clichés ... when injustices must be identified, and enemies must be named... when compassion with the suffering and deep and soul-searching faith must be expressed... when anger and fear and pain cannot be stuffed down any longer... Let me suggest that we take the biblical psalms as our model. When faced with an utter loss of words and an oversupply of volatile emotions, we best rely not on our own stuttering speech, but on the reliable and profoundly relevant laments of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Conclusion

I said earlier that there are times when I just was to look away but there are at least two things about that. First, it is a sign of our privilege when we can look the other way from the deepest suffering of the world. Those mired/caught in the brokenness don't have the luxury of looking away.

But more importantly, when we do turn away... and separate ourselves from the suffering of the world, we are also separating ourselves from God — because God is going to be with those who suffer.⁹ We know from our reading of Scripture, God is always going to be with those who suffer. It is Christian to have a broken heart when that brokenness results from paying attention to people who suffer. It matters. From a Nazi prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.”²

And that's why when we are blessed to draw near to the heart of God, we

Jesus mourns over Jerusalem

The Beatitudes are words of wisdom for the long haul. And the struggle for justice, the struggle for healing, the struggle to human flourishing is the long haul. To live toward God's promised day is not something that is fully realized today. But the first step toward that ultimate promise may be to see people in light of what they suffer.

⁹ Are, again.