

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Sarah Reed at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, February 24, 2013, Second Sunday in Lent!*

## **“Blessed Mourning”**

**Luke 13:31-35**

### **(Part III of VIII in the Sermon Series “Blessed are You”)**

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted! -  
Matthew 5:4*

I have seen and experienced mourning and I have tried to comfort. I wonder how Jesus can make such an outrageous statement than to say *Blessed are those who mourn for Happy are they*. In my head, I struggle to name blessedness in mourning, yet out of my heart's experience, I know there is blessing.

Please join me in prayer: O God, we receive such abundance in this life, yet there are times when we feel empty, alone, and in need of your assurance and blessing. As I share my meanings of Jesus' teachings, may there be a blessing for those who receive them and may each of us be transformed by your presence among us this day. Amen.

As much as anything else, I think Jesus' messages were ones that confound the popular perceptions of the day. Some focus on radical discipleship, others on hospitality, still others on his ministry of mercy and justice. Consider the number of times Jesus confounded expectations, like the day he invited the riff-raff street people to join the banquet or the day he commended the woman who bathed his feet with expensive oil. His teachings and his actions upset the legalistic and monetary desires of all time.

This Sermon on the Mount is another place where Jesus has created wonder and discomfort for 2,000 years. When others lauded the merits of accumulated wealth, Jesus looked out over the crowd

that gathered and had compassion for their lack of resources, for their sadness and feelings of being violated, for their desire for peace and righteousness. I am struck by the upside-down and inside-out-ness of the messages of these Beatitudes.

Not long ago I was sitting with a teen-ager just outside an emergency room in which his best friend was surrounded by doctors and nurses, tending to his injuries after an ATV crash. (I could give an hour-long sermon on the perils of ATVs, but not today.) This teen's heart overflowed, as he imagined whether his friend would live or die or have a lifetime of suffering. He shared his fear and we sat with our thoughts. Breaking the silence, he turned to me, "Isn't Jesus' heart just breaking!" This young man did not ask the questions that I often hear. In his wisdom, he may have realized the futility of questions. In his faith, he sensed the presence of Jesus sitting beside us, with the same concerns and fears that he was feeling.

"Why?" is a universal question voiced in hospitals everywhere. There are the global whys: Why is this happening in the world? Why do children get cancer? Where is God when parents and caregivers inflict their pains on children? There are the personal whys: Why me? Why my kid? When the question comes in the midst of unexpected loss, it's not about an explanation. The "why" means I'm angry that my kid or my spouse or my partner or my mother has to endure so much pain. It means, I'm afraid that I will lose more than my spouse or partner – I could lose my job, my house, and most of all, my sense of who I am. I'm afraid that I will be alone. When I hear the "why," I wonder isn't Jesus' heart just breaking?

Mourning has many faces. The guilty make their confessions as they mourn that they might have kept their toddler closer at hand and away from danger or if only they had said "I love you" one more time. The angry throw words and things. I've seen the fear of mourning when parents share that their heart will break again and again, and that they cannot tolerate such a possibility. Fear leads to loss of intimacy. The bone weary fatigue of mourning sits with loved ones to watch and wait for the passing. And there is the face of flight from mourning, when the thought of so much pain is too much to bear. In fact, it is our withdrawal from mourning that

perpetuates our suffering. Denial numbs us to deep parts of ourselves where joy and sorrow live (BB Taylor, *Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, p 122). In that numbness, isn't Jesus' heart just breaking!

Where is the blessing in the raw, open wounds of grief? Is the blessing hinged on a future hope that you and I will be comforted in another life? Or is there a blessing in the midst of the mourning? After all, Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is now. Where do I find the blessing in the grief that washes over me right now (or when I walk through the grocery store and reach for the cereal box that was a familiar part of life with my father)?

Jesus knew about grief. We know his heart broke. This Matthew passage is preceded by reports of Jesus having compassion and healing. The crowds surrounded him, tugged at his clothing, and he saw their brokenness and wounds. He saw the mothers of dying children and the children who were parentless. When Jesus healed, he could feel a bit of power leaving him. At the end of his life, when he reflected on his unfinished ministry, he called out to God, "help them," and I imagine that his heart was just breaking.

Perhaps we can only understand these words of blessing if we have become poor or meek or contrite. Perhaps we don't know what they mean until our stomachs ache with hunger and our tongues stick to the roof of our mouths with thirst and our heart leaves our chest from brokenness. Perhaps these words only make sense when we hit the very bottom of our souls, when we stare at the ground as we walk and cannot look up or we sit on the sofa not knowing the passage of hours because of our numbness.

I suspect that these words of the Beatitudes arose from Jesus' own feelings of poverty and mourning. Perhaps he felt the exhaustion and aches of so much hunger, so much pain, so many losses, creeping into his joints. It seems he needed to gather his friends and reflect on how upside down the world seemed. It is as if in these words, he sees the needs – hunger, thirst, longing – and somehow, he sees what we cannot see - blessing in all of it.

Could it be, as in the messages of Luke's gospel, that there is some favor, some form of protection that comes to the weak, the lonely, the tempted, the lost, the mourning? Could there be some good that comes from the anguish and grief in that valley of the shadow of death? Western culture doesn't like being in that valley. We like to "just get over it." It's hard to search out the blessings of our mourning. And still, like that teen-ager, we sense the presence of God and that Jesus' heart is just breaking.

Trying to avoid mourning is not blessedness. Avoiding may bring eruptions like a volcano in unexpected times and places. Avoiding leads to anger and unaddressed anger may turn inward as depression or lash outward spewing onto others. Jesus offers words of consolation. He promises that those who mourn will be comforted. When we are at our lowest, when the veil of pretention and defense is at its thinnest, that is when we are most open to the presence of God and the Sacred. Our tears cleanse us, washing over us like the waters of baptism, to bring us relief. In those moments of being vulnerable we can remember who and what has passed and find blessing in what was.

*You are blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. When you think there are no more tears that can be shed. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you (The Message, p 1750). Only then can you be open to the blessing of God right here, right now.*

The Sermon on the Mount is a foundation for ministry. It is a concrete response to universal human needs. It offers empowerment, encouragement, and a moral demand to follow the way of love. If Jesus confounded the status quo, what happens when we turn the blessing upside down to consider "for they will be comforted." What is the source of comfort? A person filled with grief and mourning isn't concerned with what other people think. There is no mask, no pretense of keeping it all together. It is at that point of being authentic and transparent, where mutual grief occurs, that we have an opportunity for communion, love, and healing. It is there that the comforter and the mourner meet.

Repeatedly, the Bible assures us of God's presence in our suffering. Yet, in the now of the Kingdom of God, the comforter

must also be incarnational. You and I must offer comfort. It is dangerous to think that Jesus was hanged and suffered on a cross for the sole purpose that our suffering will be taken away. I don't think that is what Jesus meant when he said "they will be comforted."

To be the comforter, one must not blunt or forget the pain. Dorothee Soelle noted that "all suffering that does not destroy [us] teaches [us] to love life all the more . . . Suffering makes [us] more sensitive to the pain in the world. It can teach us to put forth a greater love for everything that exists."<sup>1</sup> She goes on to say that what is essential is that we actively engage our suffering, that we lean into our mourning, allowing ourselves to feel and to weep. In doing so, we adopt an attitude of openness and learning. We discover that whatever change we experience comes from within, finding God from within the depths of our souls. So, turn the blessedness upside-down and become the comforter who sits with those who mourn, the one who transforms her/his own pain into a life of compassion, justice and mercy.

Simone Weil embraced this view as comforter. She set aside her life as an educator, living comfortably in the midst of World War II. She took on work as an unskilled laborer, living in a single room near the factory where she worked. The work was so hard that she became malnourished and sick. She died at the age of thirty-four because she believed she could take on suffering for the sake of others. She wrote that her Christian faith provided no remedy for suffering, but that her faith provided a "supernatural use for it."<sup>2</sup> The suffering was still there, but embracing the presence of God in the suffering brought new meaning and new life. When we go to a loving God with our mourning, the very silence of God becomes the presence of God.

Margaret Wheatley shares the story of a young black South African woman who taught a profound lesson about presence, listening, and comforting. She writes: *She was sitting in a circle of women from many nations and each woman had the chance to tell a story from her life. When her turn came, this woman began quietly to tell a story of true horror – of how she had found her grandparents*

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 125.

<sup>2</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (New York: G.P. Putnam's & Sons, 1952), 132.

*slaughtered in their village. Many of the women were Westerners, and in the presence of such pain, they instinctively wanted to do something. They wanted to fix it, to make it better, anything to remove the pain of this tragedy from such a young life. The young woman felt their compassion, but also felt them closing in. She put her hands up, as if to push back their desire to help. She said, "I don't need you to fix me. I just need you to listen to me."*<sup>3</sup> Blessed are those who know that listening is enough.

One of the greatest gifts we can give to the one who mourns is our presence in the form of undivided attention. Consider again the words of Frederick Beuchner, *If we only had eyes to see and ears to hear and wits to understand, we would know that the Kingdom of God in the sense of holiness, goodness, beauty is as close as breathing and crying out to be born both within ourselves and our world; we would know that the Kingdom of God is what we all of us hunger for above all other things even when we don't know its name or realize that it's what we're starving to death for.*<sup>4</sup> As close as breathing, as close as hungering, one person sitting with another.

Mourning does not have to destroy. After all, it is a normal response to abnormal experiences. It is our fear and evasion of mourning that destroys. Our suffering can be the means through which we discover our humanity, including our kinship with God and one another. That young man I sat with in the emergency department, the one who cared about his friend and said, "Isn't Jesus' heart just breaking!" His prayers were answered. His friend recovered from his wounds. Thanks be to God.

*You're blessed when you care. You've offered your best care to those around you, and at that moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for (The Message, p 1750). Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.* Thanks be to God.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Brady, *Right Listening* (Langley, WA: Paideia Press), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Beuchner, *The Clowns in the Belfry: Writing on Faith and Fiction* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1992), 152.