

Lenten Sermon Series 2009

*Beatitudes 2: The Power of Grief*

Isaiah 61:1-7; John 11:17-36

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“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” A lovely image, simple and straightforward compared to last week’s puzzle about the poor in spirit. We get this one. Yet it is deceptive, because the more you think about it, the less sense it makes. Indeed, if we look at the Beatitudes as a ladder, with each one leading to the next, then surely we can see how poverty in spirit is exactly what we experience when we mourn. When else are we stripped so bare? When else are we so much in need? When else are we so confronted with our dependence on God and on one another? When else are we so vulnerable?

Mourning is primal. To see another person crying moves us deeply. We feel intimately connected to someone who mourns because we’ve all experienced loss too. And nothing is more comforting than to know someone else who has experienced that same loss. This is why support groups are so helpful. Yet that very connection also frightens us because it arouses our own grief. When we see someone who is mourning, we feel a deep sympathy, but also a deep fear. We want to ease their pain, but we also want our pain to be eased. Consequently sometimes our efforts to comfort do not go over so well, because it’s really our own hearts that we’re trying to protect.

In my first church, I knew a couple who were as close as two people could be. Literally, they were like one person. When the husband died after a battle with cancer, the wife was completely devastated. We would meet and talk, and her grief was overwhelming for a young minister like myself. I could empathize with her pain, but I could not fully understand it because I had not yet at that point in my life lost anyone I deeply loved. At least I knew enough not to try to offer her well-intentioned, but inadequate words of comfort. I knew my role was to listen and be present, but she kept asking questions. “What do you believe happens after death? How am I supposed to go on after this loss?” I resisted the urge to give her answers, but she did keep asking, so finally I responded, about my hopes for the afterlife, that our loved ones live on in us. All very thoughtful, all well meant, and yet in the end, all completely useless. Bless her, she forgave me for that, but she called my BS all the same. “I miss him,” she told me with a firmness that could not be denied. “I want him back.” I had no idea what to say to her.

Since then, of course, I have lost my aunt, and I am now in a much better position to respond to anyone who is so deeply grieving. Because the truth is, she wasn’t asking me questions at all. She was giving testimony. And now, from my own experience, I could share that testimony with her: that death sucks. Forget the afterlife, we want them back *now*. We don’t want them to live in our hearts, we want them *here*. To never again hear the voice of our loved ones? To never touch them? To never see them with our own eyes or share the rest of our lives with them? That sucks! It’s not fair! I hate this! Why did God give us hearts like these when they can be so cruelly broken? “Blessed are those who mourn”? Forget that!

And yet... imagine what the alternative would be. Imagine what it would mean never to mourn. It would mean to never love. To never cherish, to never delight in, to never enjoy. As great as this pain is, I would never give up my love for my aunt for anything. For her not to exist? Or for her to exist and me not to care? Never! Never! God forbid it! And that is how we understand the truth about mourning. As Elie Wiesel put it, “The opposite of life is not death. The opposite of life is indifference.” If we did not love so much, we would never mourn. We mourn, because we care.

But we mourn more than just our loved ones. Consider other losses as well. [Solicit responses]. What about the loss of a job? That can mean more than just the loss of income, which is important enough in its own way. It can also mean the loss of a livelihood, something that we found pleasurable and meaningful. Whether it's people who are laid off, or people who retire by choice, the loss of a job can be very painful.

The loss of a dream, something we worked for that never came to pass for whatever reason. The loss of the dreams we had as teenagers when our lives were still ahead of us. Why else is it called a mid-life crisis? That's the time when you stop and say, "Whoa! This life I'm living isn't what I thought it would be when I was eighteen! What happened to that person? What happened to those dreams?" The loss of opportunity: the regret of paths not taken. Or the regret of paths taken, deeds done, that we wish we could undo. We mourn injustice. A child beaten to death by her own parents. Innocent people sent to prison. Folks trapped in poverty. A toxic waste site that poisons the community.

We mourn all these things and more. But what would it mean if we did not mourn them at all? It would mean we do not care. Indifference. The opposite of life. We mourn because we do not like what we see, because we want things to be better, we want things to be set right, to be as they ought to be, as God promised us they would be! Good news to the poor, liberty to the captive, to build up the ruins, to wear a garland instead of ashes. This is not about unrealistic hopes. These are the dreams that are worth dreaming. Even though we know they will never fully come true, do we really want to give up those dreams?

The difference between Luke's and Matthew's Beatitudes, here, is perhaps even more striking than the difference last week between "blessed are the poor" and "blessed are the poor in spirit." Luke says, "Blessed are you who mourn now, for you will laugh." He promises joy, a reversal of fortune. But I have to say that here I prefer Matthew, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." When I lost my aunt, I didn't want to hear that someday I would laugh again. What I wanted was comfort.

The word "comfort" is based on the root "to fortify." Think of what that means: to shore up, to make strong. Now, one way to fortify is to build armor around something. Think of a castle surrounded by a wall and a moat. Nothing can get in. But that would amount to indifference, to not caring about the world around us. That's no solution. But there are other ways to comfort and fortify. Think of the flying buttress on a great stone church. They don't close in. They are open, leaning on the wall and lending it extra strength, just as we lean on one another, bearing one another's burdens, sharing the load. This is surely what the Beatitude means.

The Greek word used in this Beatitude is *paraklethesontai*, which is a mouthful that means "to stand alongside of," not unlike those flying buttresses. Now remember that these Beatitudes also describe Jesus. Do you recall the only time in the gospels when Jesus weeps? It's in the story of Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha who are good friends of Jesus. He stays at their house whenever he's in town. The story of Lazarus's death is the most intimate, personal, and emotional picture we ever see of Jesus. Yet when Jesus first hears that Lazarus is ill, he is amazingly cool about it. Even after he gets the news that Lazarus has died, it still doesn't appear to affect him personally. But hear what happens when Jesus actually stands among the mourners.

When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," They replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

Some people interpret this to mean Jesus is troubled by their apparent lack of faith in his ability to resurrect Lazarus, and that may be. But perhaps it is also because only when Jesus is standing alongside them, *paraklethesontai*, do the sympathetic tears flow. Comfort. Presence. He cares because they care. This is more than just an object lesson on the resurrection. This is a loss they all mourn together, and their common grief is comforting to one another.

But that word, *paraklethesontai*, appears in a variation elsewhere in the Bible. It even makes it into English as the Paraclete. Does that sound familiar? The Paraclete is the One who is called to stand alongside us. The Paraclete is the Holy Spirit. In the Gospel of John, on the night of his betrayal, Jesus prepares the disciples for what is to come. He says, “You will mourn, but I will send you the Paraclete, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who will stand alongside you.” The thing about the Holy Spirit is that the Holy Spirit doesn’t really do anything. According to the traditional Trinitarian formula, the Father creates or begets, the Son redeems, and the Holy Spirit...sustains. The Holy Spirit stands alongside. The Holy Spirit confirms what has already been promised, what has already been done. The Holy Spirit speaks on our behalf when we are called to bear witness. As we say in the UCC statement of faith, God promises the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing. Presence. Standing alongside. Solidarity. That’s all. But that really is something. The Holy Spirit stands with us to comfort and sustain us as we wait for the fulfillment of all promises, until these dreams come true. The Holy Spirit gives us strength that all the pain is worth it because it comes from our love. The Holy Spirit assures us that love, that life, will triumph.

So it is that our ability to mourn is potentially devastating, with the power to kill our love and even our very lives. But that same ability to mourn is also the source of our greatest power, to love in spite of death, to care in spite of loss, to dream in spite of disappointment, to hope in spite of despair. It is our ability to mourn which enables us to face each new day and not give up.

Blessed indeed are those who, with the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit, are able to mourn, to risk the loss of that which they hold most dear, for they will be comforted and made strong, able to hang on until the coming day when God will give us a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and our portion shall be everlasting joy. Amen.