

“From Sad to Glad”

(Matthew 5:1-2, 4)

Dr. Randy Working
Christ Presbyterian Church

We're looking these weeks at the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, and we saw that when Jesus said, “blessed,” it's like saying, “It is well with you, you are fortunate.” But how can you be blessed when you're poor and hungry and empty? And what about mourning? How is it possible for mourners to be blessed?

That's only possible with the good news about Jesus. There's a deep joy that's not tied to happenings of life we can't control. There's comfort, and it comes from knowing Jesus.

Last week we saw that Jesus makes promises that come with the kingdom. He brackets the blessings when he says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (verse 3), and then he says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The kingdom of heaven is at hand, Jesus said—in other words, “it's right here,” because Jesus is God come to us. And when we live his way, it's a sign his life is already in us, and the kingdom belongs to us.

The Old Testament already looked forward in faith to the time God would come as the time of blessing. Isaiah said that would be a time when God was going to “comfort all who mourn in Zion” (Isaiah 61:2). He would pour out his blessings on his people. That's why the blessings Jesus talks about aren't guidelines, things you need to do to get into the kingdom. They're gifts, things God gives to those already in the kingdom by faith in Christ.

Now, the second beatitude is about those who mourn. We're often uncomfortable with mourning. One time I went a funeral of a suicide victim. I was shocked nobody doing the service even mentioned how he died, and it was the biggest thing on everybody's mind. It's like the person doing the service didn't know how to deal with it. We're uncomfortable with it sometimes, but even more, it's hard to see how that's a blessed condition.

The phrase “who mourn” can refer to people who are repentant, those who grieve over their sin. Even more generally, it refers to people who are broken, suffering, who are beaten down by grief and still respond with humble faith. David promises in Psalm 51 that God is near the brokenhearted (Psalm 51:17). In Luke chapter 3, Jesus went into the synagogue in his home town Nazareth and shared his mission statement as he begins his public ministry, and he quotes the first two verses of Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,

to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn. (Isaiah 61:1-2)

Jesus says, this is fulfilled in him. He's the person Isaiah was looking forward to. The passage Jesus quotes to the hometown crowd goes on to say,

and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair. (Isaiah 61:3)

Jesus came to heal broken hearts, to bring comfort to those who mourn. And the quickest access he has into your heart is when your mourning is the kind of mourning that turns you to him for help.

The Bible talks a lot about mourning, and that makes sense because we all experience tears. Ever since the first human beings chose to do what they wanted instead of what God wanted, they brought death into God's good creation. Grief has been a part of the human experience ever since.

Abraham mourned for Sarah. (Genesis 23: 2)

Jacob mourned because he thought his son Joseph is dead. (Genesis 37:34-35)

David mourned the death of Saul and his friend Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:11-12),
and he mourned for his son Absalom (2 Samuel 18:33).

There are other kinds of grieving than grieving the death of someone you love. Maybe it's the loss of a dream. Sometimes, we grieve because people can be ugly and hurtful, because people are not what they should be.

In Psalm 119, David mourns over the sins of God's people. He says, "Streams of tears flow from my eyes, because your Law is not obeyed" (Psalm 119:136).

In Jeremiah 18, the prophet says he mourns because of Israel's sin and because of how they're suffering because of it.

Since my people are crushed, I am crushed;
I mourn, and horror grips me.

Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there? (Jeremiah 18:21-22)

When Evelyne and I first started out in ministry, we were doing campus ministry with international students in Switzerland. God called us to seminary and to take the path

toward ordination for pastoral ministry, and we left ministry to come to Fuller Seminary, but we always had the dream of returning to Switzerland. One day I got a call asking me to come and preach at the church where we got started in Geneva, and to interview for the job of pastor. We were so excited and we thought, wouldn't it be just like the Lord to lead us back to the place that believed in us and gave us a start in ministry. I flew over to Geneva and spent a great weekend, interviewing and preaching at the morning service. That night when it was all over, I fell into a blue funk. I didn't understand, and I wondered why I felt so depressed. Everything had gone great. Then I realized, it was because I knew the job wasn't where God was calling me. It was the death of a dream. It would turn out that God had something better in mind, but I didn't know that at the time. I had to trust him, to let the dream go, and to mourn it's passing.

All the way through the Bible, there's mourning, from the hard reality of death to the sadness of what sin does. Let's look at some of the aspects of mourning.

First, we need to mourn.

We're so much more subdued in our culture than in other places. A lot of us come from Northern European backgrounds, the kind of stiff upper lip reaction. But in the Bible times, people would scream and tear their clothes to show their sadness. Places do that still today—have you ever seen news reports of a village in the Middle East when people mourn the death of a loved one.

I've been at a lot of funerals, and you probably have, too, and there's no real comfort apart from Jesus Christ. I've been at ones where the message is basically, "Don't cry, they didn't really die." What kind of comfort is that? None at all. Comfort is for those who are poor in spirit, for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for the fullness of God's way on earth.

Second, not all mourning is good.

Sometimes we get stuck in it, and God says, "I want you to focus on something else. What you've lost wasn't my plan for you."

When David mourns over his son Absalom, it wasn't in the right way. His general Joab had to tell him,

"We saved your life today and the lives of your family. Yet you act this way as if we had done something wrong. You seem to love those who hate you and hate those who love you. You're giving your people the impression you would have been happier if they had died in Absalom's rebellion and he had lived. Now go out and congratulate the troops, because if you don't, I swear not a one of them will remain here tonight." (2 Samuel 19:5-7)

Absalom's death meant the kingdom was saved, and David had to put his personal tragedy in a bigger perspective.

Some mourning flat out isn't good because we fixate on what we want even when it goes against God's will. Sometimes dreams have to die, and when Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn," he was talking about certain kinds of mourning.

Third, there's a right way to mourn.

I think you can apply this test to it. Ask yourself two questions; the first question is,

What makes Jesus sad?

The things that are blessed are the things that show the life of God in our lives. We should ask, "What would Jesus do?" Would he mourn for this? A lot of kinds of mourning probably don't fit that. But some places in Scripture, we see him mourn: when he's with his friends Mary and Martha, and their friend Lazarus has died. Jesus is about to raise Lazarus back to life, but he still grieves, because the loss is real.

In Matthew 23 when he sees the spiritual lostness of Jerusalem, when they've rejected him, their Savior, and he sees the time coming it will be destroyed. He grieves over their sin and the consequences that are coming, just like the prophets did.

That should make us sad, too. When we let God get our priorities straight, we develop an instinct about what's up and what's down, what's good and what's bad, and our lives and our grieving and our celebrating start to make sense.

The second part of the right way to mourn is to ask, What makes Jesus glad?

Luke chapter 10 tells about Jesus sending 72 disciples out in ministry, and then how they came back excited about what God had done. Luke says,

At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. (Luke 10:21).

What makes Jesus glad? It's seeing the power of the Holy Spirit unleashed, and people saved through faith. It's seeing life restored, and people healed and made whole.

Genesis says God told Abraham and Sarah they were going to have a baby in their old age, and Sarah laughed at the idea. But God wanted to turn their sadness to joy, her mourning to rejoicing. She got pregnant, and had a son, and named him Isaac, which means, "He laughs." No more ironic, bitter laughter, but a real laugh of joy and celebration. (Genesis 21:1-7)

So appropriate mourning is to see what makes Jesus sad or glad, and to learn to see life with his perspective.

Emily Kingsley wrote about her experience of having a baby with a disability.

She says, it's like you plan to go on a fabulous vacation to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and look forward to seeing the Coliseum Michelangelo's David, to ride the gondolas in Venice.

Then, after months of excitement, the day arrives. You pack your bags and go. You get on your flight, and hours later, the stewardess comes and says, "Welcome to Holland."

You say, "What?! What do you mean, Holland! I signed up for Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy." But there's been a change of plans, and you have to stay in Holland.

Now, there's nothing wrong with Holland. It's not a horrible place. So you go and buy new guide books, and you have to learn a new language. And you meet a whole new group of people you never would've met. It's just a different place. And when you start to look around, you see there's beauty and goodness here, too. There are windmills, and tulips, and Rembrandts.

But everyone you know is coming and going from Italy, and they're all bragging about what a great time they're going to have there. And the rest of your life, you tell yourself, yes, that's where I was supposed to go. And the pain of that doesn't go away, because it's the loss of a dream.

But you can spend the rest of your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy, and if you do, you'll never enjoy the amazing and beautiful things about Holland.

One last thing. Mourning is the natural response to loss and to sin and brokenness, and the right way to react is to turn to God. And when we come face to face with the beauty, truth, and goodness of God, with the bigness of God, the right response is to worship. Like Job, when he lost everything, he said, "The Lord gave me everything I had, and the Lord has taken it away. Praise the name of the Lord!"

When life hurts, turn to God, because he wants to fill you with his love. And when we're sad, God will make us glad, and we can say,

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 have received from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)