

“Blessed Are Those Who Weep”

Matthew 5:1-12
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“Blessed are those who mourn; they shall be comforted.”

I would say that comforting the mourners is at the forefront of my job description. It is also at the forefront of this congregation’s understanding of what it means to be ‘church.’ Every day of the year, someone is grieving some kind of a loss. It might be the death of a family member. It might be the loss of a pet. It could be the loss of a job or of a dream or of self-esteem. It could be the loss of youthfulness or of one’s singing voice or of one’s athletic prowess. It could be the loss of professional standing or the loss of a marriage or the loss of a dating relationship. There are so many kinds of loss. All of them matter. All of them call for some kind of mourning process. All of them put us in touch with what is sacred. All our losses are like avenues that connect us to the healing energy of God.

Our culture tends to down play our losses. We say things to each other such as: ‘get over it.’ Or, ‘It’s been a week, move on.’ Or, ‘big boys don’t cry.’ Or other expressions that suggest we are uneasy about how to be with people in times of loss. The second beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,” suggests there is something sacred about our losses, about our weeping; something that doesn’t want to be rushed; something that knows that this is a time for a grace-filled encounter with God; thus, a time to be savored and probed for the depth of meaning it may reveal. As painful as our losses are; they are also the times when our souls are most alive, most porous.

When I turned on the radio Tuesday morning, I learned of the death of one of my all-time heroes, Pete Seeger. I knew he was well into his nineties and frail, but his death hit me like a ton of bricks. How will the world go on without his banjo? How will the world go on without his prophetic lyrics? How will the world go on without his personal warmth, without his tireless effort to restore Creation to its intended beauty? I dug out my Pete Seeger tapes. After the third time singing through “Turn, Turn, Turn,” I knew I would have to do something more. I thought about his effort to clean up the Hudson River of all its pollutants. That made me think of Hans Tschinkel and his efforts to clean up Roaring Brook. When I am back on my feet this spring, I will walk through Cotton Hollow once a week, picking up litter. It’s not the mighty Hudson, but it’s in my backyard. It will be my way of grieving Pete Seeger’s death; my way of honoring his life. And I believe those walks along Roaring Brook will offer a close encounter of the divine kind. God will be my comfort as I walk along the path snagging those empty iced tea bottles, those flattened juice boxes, those remains of weekend picnics. It will be a ritual walk. It will be a grief observed. It will be a way of living into that Beatitude: “Blessed are those who mourn; they will be comforted.”

To be comforted...this is a very personal matter. No two people are comforted in exactly the same way. The work of a church family is to listen carefully to what a mourner needs in order to be comforted, and then to provide that comfort no matter how long it takes, no matter what is required. If the mourners in a church family are not comforted, then, in a mystical sort of way, nothing else matters. The ministry and the mission come to a halt. A church’s first priority is to comfort those who weep.

I am remembering a funeral we hosted here at South Church many years ago. It was for Mr. Jurev who lived out on Quarry Road. As I sat and listened to his wife tell me about his life, I could hear so clearly that the one thing that would be a comfort to her would be if someone would play ‘The Red River Valley’ on the harmonica. We searched high and low until we found the right musician. I’m sure there was a fabulous homily and moving testimonials and lovely organ music. But the comfort for the soul came with the Red River Valley. This is a song not found in any hymnal, not listed anywhere as sacred music; but it was the one melody that mattered above all on that day. Lani Jurev knew the comfort of God.

To be comforted . . . this is a personal matter. It is John who tells the amazing story of the death of Lazarus. He was the brother of Mary and Martha. They had hoped that Jesus would come in time to heal their brother, but he was delayed. Lazarus was already in the tomb for four days when Jesus finally showed up. He found Mary and Martha grieving bitterly. According to John, Jesus arrived at their home, and he wept. This is known as the shortest verse in the Bible to Trivial Pursuit players. Jesus wept. But it is known as a compassionate teaching for church people in the midst of grief. To weep with those who are weeping . . . this is how Jesus models for the church how to offer a ministry of comfort. No words are spoken. No platitudes are offered. No theological jargon is portioned out. For his tears to mingle with theirs; this is a ministry of healing.

Again, our culture isn’t big on tears. We say things like, “Be strong,” meaning, “Don’t cry.” Yet the Savior of the world comforts the sisters with his tears. So, I never leave the house each morning without a handkerchief, sometimes with two! My mother kept me supplied with hankies; many have my initial R sewn onto them. To weep with those who weep is to bless and to be blessed.

To be comforted . . . this is a personal matter. “Blessed are those who mourn; they shall be comforted.”

Implicit in this teaching is the importance of acknowledging that one is grieving, that there has, indeed, been a loss, or perhaps an anticipated loss. I think Jesus understood that we are often unconscious of our losses. We don't name them as such. And it becomes a ministry of the church to help a person realize that what lies beneath the anger or the anxiety or the depression or the confusion is an ungrieved loss.

Let me give you an example. We left South Dakota in 1980 and took up residence in Wisconsin. I started my duties at the Congregational Church on the town square. I'd go into work at 8:00 and before I knew it, it was coffee time, then lunch time, then tea time, then quitting time. I went through the motions day after day, not really accomplishing anything. Week after week, month after month, I tended to the tasks, but I wasn't making anything like an emotional investment in the community. It was weird. It didn't seem like me. Being standoffish wasn't my style. In about the sixth month, we had the service of installation. I invited my friend, Jack Brooks, from South Dakota, to come and give the charge to the congregation. At one point he looked out at the people and said, and I quote, “One thing you may not know about Dick; Dick is grieving. He is missing the 500 people he loved out in Eagle Butte.”

As soon as he spoke those words, the tears welled up in my eyes, and I knew what was the matter. But it took someone else to name it. Once it was named, then I could deal with it. I hadn't really said goodbye to my former parish. That next week, I wrote about 150 personal letters saying goodbye to the people I had come to love. Jack Brooks was my comforter. He named what had not been named.

I've given some thought to offering a class on how to discern and to name when someone in the church family is mourning a loss. This feels like a sacred way to equip people for ministry, to the end that the second Beatitude: "Blessed are those who mourn; they shall be comforted;" moves off the printed page of the Bible as something to study, and into the life of the local church as something to do. I have to believe that is what Jesus had in mind: equipping the saints for a ministry of comfort. I think he may have said so, in the greatest of hope. Amen!