

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, there was a woman who lived in a small primitive village. She had to carry water every day for her home. She had to go down to a small river near the edge of the village to get the water. As soon as the sun came up, she would put a long pole across her shoulders. At each end of the pole was a clay jar that would hold a few gallons of water.

Both jars were the same, but one of them was slightly broken; it had a small crack in the side. Of course, water leaked out as she returned from the river. Because it was a small crack, the water leaked slowly. By the time she got back to her home, the jar was only half full. For years, the woman made the journey from her home to the river and back.

As the years passed by, the cracked jar started doubting its value. It felt ashamed and unworthy since it could not do its job properly. It compared itself to the other jar which did not leak. It felt like it was a disappointment to the woman. It mourned because it was broken.

Eventually, the pain and shame that it felt about its own perceived imperfections, became too much to bear. So, one day as the woman knelt beside the river and began filling the jars with water, the cracked jar found its voice and said to the woman:

“I am so sorry. For years and years, I have watched you fill me with water, and I can only imagine how disappointed you are in me for not doing my job properly. I’m only half full when we get back to your house. I’m not like the other jar who holds all the water you put in it. I totally understand if you want to replace me.”

The woman listened with both compassion and care. She did not share the cracked jar’s view. She knew about its brokenness, but she did not see it as an imperfection and did not think of the jar as being inferior. After listening, the woman paused and gently spoke to the cracked jar.

“On our return walk home, I want you to look up and to the side of you. For too long, it seems you have been looking down, comparing yourself to others, and not noticing how you and your brokenness have brought untold beauty to my life.”

Puzzled, the cracked jar wondered what the woman’s words meant. On the return journey, the jar did as the woman had asked. It looked up and it looked out. It noticed for the very first time how beautiful one side of the path was—so much color, so much amazing beauty, so much life!

You see, the woman in her wisdom, knowing of the crack in the jar’s side, had sprinkled seeds along the path. These seeds were watered every day as a result of the crack in the jar’s side. The path that had once been barren, ugly, and empty was now lined with beautiful flowers.

The cracked jar now understood. It’s mourning turned into blessing as it learned to see itself in a new way. It found comfort. There was no need to be ashamed or embarrassed by what it once thought was a flaw. The crack in its side—once a source of sadness and mourning—was used in a powerful way to bring life, beauty, and blessings to others.

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

DISCUSSION

Last week we began a study of the Beatitudes. There is a lot of conversation about the nature of the Beatitudes. Are they a check list for those who follow Christ? Are these the things we are to pursue and do? Are we to pursue mourning or persecution? I don't think so, and the context of when and where Jesus presents the Beatitudes reveals a different view of them.

As Jesus begins his ministry, He goes back home to Galilee, fulfilling a prophecy from Isaiah. Jesus goes back to people in need and/so

*The people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.*

—Matthew 4:16 NIV

Jesus begins preaching, bringing light, life, and hope, and there is an overwhelming response.

Jesus traveled throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. News about him spread as far as Syria, and people soon began bringing to him all who were sick. And whatever their sickness or disease, or if they were demon possessed or epileptic or paralyzed—he healed them all. Large crowds followed him wherever he went—people from Galilee, the Ten Towns, Jerusalem, from all over Judea, and from east of the Jordan River.

—Matthew 4:23-25NLT

Can you imagine this scene—the people showing up to see Jesus, hoping for healing?

There are wheelchairs, walkers, canes, and crutches everywhere. Deformed and diseased bodies are present, as well as people having seizures. The despised and demon-possessed, the maligned and marginalized, the poor and the pitiful—the rejects of society—they all come.

Also in the crowd, no doubt, are healthy and wealthy people. Religious leaders, critics, and the curious are also there. It is quite a crowd that surrounds Jesus. Why are they coming? Because Jesus is announcing Good News and blessings from God, and he is proving it—confirming it—in the physical realm. He is healing bodies as a sign that souls are being healed and saved.

This community has gathered; people in every situation in life. When Jesus sees the crowd he leads them up on a mountainside so he can teach them and so they can hear him.

When we were in Israel a couple of years ago, we visited the Mount of Beatitudes (JPEG-MB). It's a beautiful place that looks out over the Sea of Galilee. Tradition says this is the place where Jesus speaks these blessings, these Beatitudes. By the way, Beatitude is a Latin word that simply means "blessed are."

Jesus, standing on this mountain, looks at the crowd—so diverse, so different, and yet all on the same journey through life. I imagine Jesus looking at individuals, people like you and me, as He speaks. We are on the same journey but at different places.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

—Matthew 5:3-10 NIV

Instead of this being a checklist of things to pursue and do, I think, rather, the Beatitudes—the blessings—are a reflection of who is in the crowd that day. Jesus is speaking to everyone, including people like you and me—people in different phases and stages of life and in different places in their relationship with God. The Kingdom is here and now is available for all, including us, no matter where we start from. This is Good News!

There are people in the crowd who have experienced virtually every pain known to humanity. They have stood at caskets that contained husbands, wives, sons and daughters, and babies. They have heard doctors say, “It’s cancer; it doesn’t look good.” They’ve heard spouses say, “I want a divorce.” They have heard employers say, “We’re downsizing.” Others have tried and failed over and over again, but sin just keeps winning, and all they can do is weep.

Hopelessness
Helpless
Broken-hearted
They mourn

Jesus looks at them (and us) with compassion and says, “Blessed are you when you mourn, because you are in a position to feel the presence and the power of God—a comfort like no other, a peace that makes no sense. You will be comforted in the chaos by God and others in this new Kingdom community, and you will, in turn, comfort others, becoming a blessing to them.”

When we were at the Mount of Beatitudes on our Israel trip, I can’t really explain what happened to me, but I surprisingly was overcome with emotion as I went inside the church building that was built there. Surrounded by its beauty, I quickly moved away from everyone and started weeping. I was mourning something.

Mourning is beyond simple sadness. Mourning is deep-seated sorrow and grief related to loss and disappointment—unmet expectations. We mourn over the loss of life, relationships, and dreams. We mourn over our failures and the sin that just keeps biting us over and over again, creating confusion.

Ultimately, I think, there is a deep-seated mourning over the fact that life is not what it could be, should, or will be. It’s interesting that Jesus mourns. His deep-seated sorrow is expressed with painful tears. He stands at Lazarus’s tomb and weeps, He weeps as He enters Jerusalem, and He is overcome and overwhelmed by sorrow in the Garden of Gethsemane. Why does Jesus mourn and weep? Because things are not right.

Sin entered this world and with it came death, disease, and everything that is not right. Jesus came to reverse the curse of sin. Though it was a painful journey for Him, He came to bring comfort. Comfort comes from knowing that God promises us that all will be made new and right. A day is coming when:

He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.

—Revelation 21:4 NLT

I reached out to Susan Gales and Carly Powell regarding mourning. I could have reached out to many others in the room. Susan lost her husband Roger more than a year ago, and Carly experienced a miscarriage a few weeks ago. I asked for honest responses to this Beatitude—*blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted*.

I appreciate their willingness to be vulnerable and share real thoughts about this Beatitude. I wish I could share everything they wrote, and I would love for you to talk to them. I want to share a few common elements of their responses.

This Beatitude—being blessed in mourning—doesn’t seem to make sense at first. It seems contradictory. Mourning doesn’t feel like a blessing; there is often confusion in mourning. There are honest questions from hurting hearts that start with Why—questions that have no good answers.

The blessing and the comfort part is found in their faith. Both women find great comfort through Jesus and His church. Carly said, “*This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be. The world is very broken. (But) Jesus weeps with us. I have to rely on knowing one day I won’t suffer this suffering anymore.*” Susan talked about trusting God and how He understands her loss. He watched His Son die. He provides a comfort that only He can provide.

And yet both Susan and Carly point to how God uses people to mediate His blessing of comfort. No one knows exactly how a person feels, but hugs, meals, prayers, texts, calls, cards, and other expressions of care make a huge difference. They come from family, friends, work family, church family, and from surprising places at times. God can use any of us to comfort others.

It’s interesting that both women point to a song that expresses part of the blessing in, and of, mourning:

*I’ve still got joy in chaos
I’ve got peace that makes no sense
I won’t be going under
I’m not held by my own strength
‘Cause I’ve built my life on Jesus
He’s never let me down
He’s faithful in every season
So why would He fail now
He won’t, He won’t*

CONCLUSION

Henri Nouwen writes a lot about embracing the pain in this life.

We must mourn our losses. We cannot talk or act them away, but we can shed tears over them and allow ourselves to grieve deeply. To grieve is to allow our losses to tear apart feelings of security and safety and lead us to the painful truth of our brokenness. Our grief makes us experience the abyss of our own life in which nothing is settled, clear, or obvious, but everything is constantly shifting and changing. But in the midst of all this pain, there is a strange, shocking, yet very surprising voice. It is the voice of the One who says:

“Blessed are those who mourn; they shall be comforted.”

That’s the unexpected news: there is a blessing hidden in our grief. Somehow, in the midst of our tears, a gift is hidden. Somehow, the cries that well up from our losses belong to our songs of gratitude.

–Henri J. M. Nouwen

We are all fragile and broken in various ways, and that’s OK. We can be redeemed and restored. Wounded healers are the best healers. They are humble; they understand. From our wounds/scars/brokenness, we can love with understanding, providing the comfort of God.

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.

–2 Corinthians 1:3,4 NLT

Did you catch what Paul is saying? Comfort comes from God, and it flows through us to others. Susan and Carly felt that from others, and now they are a source of comfort to others.

Susan mentioned that she is still broken, and I’m fairly certain Carly feels the same. I think we are all broken in various ways, and like that cracked water jar, our brokenness can be a source of life and beauty for others.

The blessing of mourning is not the elimination of pain or sorrow. Rather, it is a deep-seated sense of peace and hope that comes from knowing that we are not alone in our suffering. We help each other through this journey, being blessed and being a blessing.

COMMUNION

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed.

–Psalm 34:18 NLT

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

–John 16:33 NIV