

# *Blessed are Those Who Mourn*

Second in Lenten Sermon Series on the Beatitudes

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

March 17, 2019

Psalm 43

<sup>1</sup>Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me! <sup>2</sup>For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off? Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy? <sup>3</sup>O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. <sup>4</sup>Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God. <sup>5</sup>Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

Luke 8:40-42, 49-56

<sup>40</sup>Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him. <sup>41</sup>Just then there came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his house, <sup>42</sup>for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying. As he went, the crowds pressed in on him. <sup>49</sup>While he was still speaking, someone came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer." <sup>50</sup>When Jesus heard this, he replied, "Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved." <sup>51</sup>When he came to the house, he did not allow anyone to enter with him, except Peter, John, and James, and the child's father and mother. <sup>52</sup>They were all weeping and wailing for her; but he said, "Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping." <sup>53</sup>And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. <sup>54</sup>But he took her by the hand and called out, "Child, get up!" <sup>55</sup>Her spirit returned, and she got up at once. Then he directed them to give her something to eat. <sup>56</sup>Her parents were astounded; but he ordered them to tell no one what had happened.

While pondering how both today's Psalm and the Gospel proclaim a God who blesses those who mourn, over the course of this last week the events of the nation and world moved us from sadness and sorrow to deep grief and mourning.

Early in the week, when the news broke about the College Admissions Fraud, I found myself feeling so sad. Not very far removed from our own family's navigating the college admission process, I cannot count the number of conversations I have had with youth and parents of this church about their visiting college campuses, applying to schools, waiting for acceptances and making choices. It is a time in a family's life that is joyful and anxious, hopeful and fearful, of holding on tightly to parent-child relationships and simultaneously beginning to let go. It is a transitional season of mixed emotions for all.

So the story about how fifty wealthy, white, incredibly privileged people had cheated not only the College Board and the universities, but also their children. I found myself feeling overwhelming sadness for their children – how that breach of trust, deceit, and misuse of privilege conspired ultimately to injure the children of those involved, as well as adding insult to injury among the youth who know they will never have the access that wealth can provide.

Then, come Friday – in one of the most beautiful countries in the world, in a city named after the Church of Jesus Christ, the white nationalist terrorist attacked two mosques leaving at least fifty dead and countless injured. The sadness caused by scandal gave way to a plummeting, into deep grief and sorrow, for the world where racism and intolerance are on the rise. We rage against the incessant gun violence, and we mourn the lives of innocents lost, because – we know as I heard a professor from Princeton say on Friday, “An epidemic of hatred and fear is engulfing the world... This is an attack on our common humanity.”

*Blessed are those who mourn, Jesus says, for they will be comforted.*  
Good God – where is our comfort now? That is the question of the Psalmist who gives voice to our lament. *Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me... why must I walk around mournfully?*

The commentary of my Old Testament professor, Jim Mays, shows why Psalm 43 relates to the deep grief of our world today. He wrote: “The social, personal and theological experience of the absence of God is the soul’s hunger and thirst. This Psalm was composed by a representative individual who speaks with and for a group in the troubled times of the post-exilic period. It was a time when the faithful were at the mercy of other peoples in whose midst they had to live. In their season of being surrounded by deceit and ungodliness, they took their grief and mourning on pilgrimage to worship, praying for God’s light and truth to prevail.”

It could not be a more appropriate prayer for our time: *O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling... Hope in God; for I shall again praise God, my help and my God.*

Jim Mays goes on to remind us of this Lenten connection: When facing the suffering of his passion, Jesus echoed the language of this psalm in speaking of his own downcast, disquieted soul. None of us escapes the need that is the subject of this prayer, Jim Mays wrote. Jesus teaches us that those who have and understand this profound need for God are indeed blessed, because it is precisely the recognition of our need for God that brings us into the presence of God. <sup>1</sup>

So we find ourselves mourning, and feeling sorrowful in the turning of these days - for: the extent to which deceit and ungodliness has taken over the hallways of wealth and power; the explosion of racism and religious intolerance of the other amid migrations of people due to warfare, famine and

---

<sup>1</sup> James Mays, *The Psalms*, Interpretation commentary, p. 174-6.

poverty; the Ethiopian Airline crash that has left a wide swath of grief across thirty-five nations that lost citizens when the plane went down; those grieving 24 dead in Alabama from tornados; the rigid political lines of opposition in Washington over the budget, the environment, healthcare and matters of justice; the broadening investigation of the President and his team...

I could keep naming the things that have me mournful these days – and you could add you own sorrows to the list. So what happens when we take that list and hold it up and ask ourselves: What corrects, what opposes, what redeems all these sources of grief and anguish? We would find the counter-response in the words of Jesus: *Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek; blessed are the merciful.*

One faithful pillar of this congregation said this to me after worship last Sunday when I began this sermon series and has given me permission to repeat it: “I have always loved the Beatitudes, but I have never understood them.” I think the struggle for understanding begins with the interpretation of the word, blessed. The Greek word, – is variously translated as happy, fortunate, or blessed. Many versions of the Bible choose the word Happy, which is a fine translation of the original Greek, but that word “happy” has gotten watered down, trivialized, and as one biblical scholar notes, “so shredded into confetti, that the ‘*happiness*’ we pursue has virtually nothing to do with what Jesus had in mind when he said “*blessed.*” Ancient people did not harbor a superficial, fun-oriented notion of happiness. <sup>2</sup>

University of Virginia biblical theologian, Robert Wilken, summarizes the difference: “For us the term *happiness* has come to mean ‘feeling good’ or enjoying certain pleasures, a transient state that arrives and departs as circumstances change or fortune intervenes. For the ancients, happiness was a possession of the soul, something that one acquired and that, once acquired, could not easily be taken away. Happiness designated the supreme aim of

---

<sup>2</sup> James C. Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today*, p. 5, 28

human life... living in accord with nature, in harmony with our deepest aspirations as human beings.”<sup>3</sup>

So, you see, to be blessed by God runs deeper than any contemporary ideal of mere happiness. How else could we understand the Beatitude that is the focus of today, and the one that offers such a profound promise in this week that has seen so much grief and sadness? *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

For those who mourn, Jesus’ healing the daughter of Jairus shows how this blessing of comfort unfolds in the present and in the future tense. Jairus is desperate to have his daughter healed. As a ruler of the synagogue, he would have been in charge of the everyday affairs concerning worship, at least somewhat wealthy, a prominent, well-respected person in the community. Under normal circumstances, he would have not been the one begging, but rather the one answering to other beggars. He also would have had nothing to do with Jesus; for the religious establishment caused a lot of trouble for Jesus, repeatedly confronted him, and ultimately accused him of blasphemy, one of the charges that led to his death at the end. Normally a power broker, here Jairus was falling apart, and in desperation, he came to trust Jesus could heal his twelve-year-old daughter who was close to death.

Jesus draws his would-be opponent into the sphere of his compassion, and we see how Jesus gently attends to the grieving. He holds the crowds who are proclaiming her death at bay; he takes only his closest disciples and the child’s mother and father in with him to her bedside, he acknowledges their grief and weeping, and then he heals her. When Jesus says, “Child, get up,” he uses the very same word that will describe his own resurrection. Jesus actually resurrects her; he restores her to full life again by saying, “Give her something to eat.” This girl’s resurrection, you see, foreshadows Jesus’ own resurrection, which is, of course, the ultimate comfort for those who mourn – that in life and in death we belong to God.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Wilken quoted in Howell, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> David Bartlett, “The Beatitudes,” *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2017, p. 17.

Years ago, Yale philosopher, Nicholas Wolterstorff, suffered the death of his twenty-five year old son in a mountain climbing accident. Several years after his son Eric's death, he noticed that while the wound was no longer raw, it had not disappeared... because grief becomes testimony to the worth of the loved one. He wrote about how deep grief parallels deep love saying, "every lament is a love-song... and through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God." And then he connects that uniquely personal season of grieving the loss of his son to the sorrow we share when we look across the world today: "The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God's new day, who ache with all their being for the day's coming, and who break out into tears when confronted by absence... The mourners are aching visionaries. Such people Jesus blessed..." He goes on: "The Stoics of antiquity said: Be calm, disengage yourself. Jesus says: Be open to the wounds of the world. Mourn humanity's mourning, weep over humanity's weeping, be wounded by humanity's wounds, be in agony over humanity's agony. but do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming."<sup>5</sup>

Friends, when Jesus said to Jairus' daughter, "Child, get up," her spirit returned and she got up at once. So Jesus says to our downcast spirits, "Get up." The depth of our mourning is paralleled by the depth of God's love for the world and all God's children in it. Therein lies our comfort.

Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> Wolterstorff quoted in Howell, p. 43.