

Those Who Mourn

Essay 3 in the series “The Beatitudes”

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

Simply to read this second of Jesus’ Beatitudes in Matthew 5:4, or to hear it, is to realize again just how counter-cultural these teachings of Jesus are. These teachings turn our world upside-down. These teachings turn our notion of how things are upside-down. Who believes that those who mourn are blessed? And certainly this would have been a hard sell in Jesus’ own time – to those in Galilee who were struggling just to survive, who suffered under Roman occupation, who were terrorized by Roman crosses, who were outraged by the injustice of it all, who despaired of freedom and who were hurtling toward great national tragedy. But “Blessed are those who mourn” is always counter-cultural.

To people who obviously want to be happy, who value happiness, who measure their lives by how happy they feel, Jesus comes saying, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

To people who do whatever they can to mask their sadness, to deny it, to hide it, Jesus comes saying, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

To those who consider it unseemly to cry, who see crying as a sign of weakness, of failure, Jesus comes saying, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

To those put off by the apparent happiness of others, by the easy smiles of others, who somehow feel left out, left behind, Jesus comes saying, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

To those scarred by childhood trauma, or overwhelmed by a sense of their own sinfulness, their own unworthiness, their own failure, Jesus comes saying, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

And he uses the strongest word for mourning that he has, mourning for a loved one who has died, grief that at first seems inconsolable, the sadness that comes with devastating loss that forces us down beneath the surface of life, down deep into the depths. This, in fact, is the key to what Jesus is saying. Because once you’re there and only by being there, in grief that is acknowledged, in grief no long denied or masked in drugs or alcohol or sex, only then, only there in that dark place, can you find the light, the consolation, the way forward, the unshakable joy that no one and nothing can take away.

In fact, with just a little thought we know that Jesus is right on this – that there is little to be learned from the good times, the easy times, in our lives. Almost all that we learn, particularly of those truths that matter most down on heart level, we learn in times of

sorrow, not in our brightest days but in our darkest nights. It is only those who for a season have felt forsaken by God who know that the Lord is their shepherd. It only those who have walked through the valley of the shadow of death who fear no evil.

Or as the Teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes knew (this in Ecclesiastes 7:2), “It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting.” It is there in the house of mourning that we find our way to wisdom, to maturity, to spiritual insight, even to fearlessness, to a kind of invincibility. It is there in the house of mourning that we learn to make peace with the idea that things are always changing – that things are always coming together and falling apart, and coming together again and falling apart again, and that often it is their falling apart that brings healing and creates space for what is new and better, for what is transcendent, for what is eternal. It is there in the house of mourning that we uncover the source of our unhappiness: that behind our unhappiness there are always unhappy stories, dramas we keep telling ourselves that fuel our distress. And the sooner we quit telling these stories, the sooner our lives take off. But we have to go into the house of mourning to learn this, to hear the stories we keep telling ourselves.

Almost everything we need to know we learn in the house of mourning: the things that work and the things that don't, the things that matter and the things that don't, the things that last and the things that don't, the things we can count on and the things we can't, how small, fragile and vulnerable our egos are, and how important it is that we rise above them, that we transcend them, yet when we do rise above ourselves, when we transcend our egos, how strong and resilient we really are inside. It's in the house of mourning that we learn to live in the present moment, to find delight in the ordinary, in the simple gifts that are already all around us. It's in the house of mourning that we learn to show up for whatever life offers, to not hold back because things are not going as we wish, but to let go of our preferences and acquire the kind of invincibility that comes from not being attached to any particular outcomes. There is so much that can be learned only in the house of mourning. And all the great stories of the world involve someone facing sorrow in life, someone going to the house of mourning.

It was this that Jesus did when he went to the cross, laying his life down for all of us, entering into the sorrow of the world, taking it on as his own, subjecting himself to scorn and ridicule, enduring betrayal and denial and abandonment by those in his inner circle, finally dying a death of unimaginable, excruciating pain. There are other stories to tell, but I cannot tell them. Because they are your stories. And you will have to first see them and tell them to yourself.

In the end, Jesus is commending above all spiritual mourning, that dark night of the soul when we realize that nothing we are doing is working, that nothing we have really matters to us, that some we thought we knew we don't, when we are overwhelmed by the things we have done wrong, the mistakes we have made, the ways in which we have hurt others, when we cry out for something more, something better, something transcendent, when we cry out, that is, for God, to know God, to encounter God, to be one with God.

And it is this group whom Jesus calls blessed. It is they who finally now can grasp that joy, that radiant joy, that radiant, unshakable joy that no one, no circumstance, no tragedy, no loss can take from them. By embracing their own pain, their own sadness, by not evading it, by resolving to learn from it, they find their way forward.

It all happens, however, in the house of mourning. At first when there, all we want is to get out. To make the pain go away. To feel the way we did before. To have things back the way they were before. We'll do anything, call a friend, go shopping, pour another drink, take another pill. But what if we tried to stay with the grief? Just for five minutes. Just for ten. Maybe it has something for us. A gift. A grace. In fact, it is, I think, a very great mistake to persistently avoid the house of sorrow, to deny the wrongs around us and the pain within us, to drink it away, to run it away, to laugh it away. It is, in the end, to lose one's own soul.

The things that matter most in life happen in the house of mourning. All life's deepest and most important truths are learned in the house of mourning. All the necessary mid-course corrections are learned in the house of mourning. The way to rebirth, the way to lasting joy, is through the house of mourning. First sorrow, then joy.

So life crashes in on you. All your worst fears are realized. What you did not want to happen happened. Your ego is crushed. Your pride lies smashed to pieces. Things are entirely out of your control. And now you know it. And in that moment, in this moment you most dreaded, you feel something you never anticipated, something you never could have imagined happening, relief, peace, a different, higher kind of peace, a peace that passes understanding. And you stop in wonder. And the feeling grows and grows. Your heart relaxes and expands. It's almost like happiness, like joy, like unshakeable joy, joy no one and nothing can take from you. And then you move past all that to euphoria. This is what God calls you to. Euphoria. A state called beatitude. Euphoria because your now emptied self fills with God. Your now emptied self fills with God. And that euphoria you experience as freedom, as heartfelt gratitude, as deep, deep trust.

That's it. That's what God calls you to. That's what he wants you to have. But often, very often, it begins in the house of mourning.

– Dale Pauls