

September 21, 2014

The National Presbyterian Church

The Beatitudes: Good Grief

John 11:17-28, 32-44; Amos 7:4-7, Isaiah 61:1-3a; Matthew 7:1-5

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In our sermons this fall we are looking together at Jesus' teaching on the subject of happiness, a subject Jesus speaks about in the opening verses of the 5th Chapter of Matthew's gospel in statements that we call the Beatitudes.

Now I would presume that every single one of us here today would rather be happy than miserable. I think that would be true of all of us. Some of you may say "Well it's been such a long time since I've been happy, in fact whether I want to be or not, I'm miserable. Maybe depressed."

If you have said that to yourself, let me suggest right from the outset that it's time, in all seriousness, to visit a physician. They can help us in wonderful ways if we're stuck in a sense of depression or unhappiness that will not go away; they can diagnose if we are clinically depressed; there's no shame in that. Seek help!

Having said that, though, for most of us, even if we are happy from time to time, we'd like to be happier still! That's my initial presumption . . .

But I'd also presume this: that for some of us here today we may not be entirely convinced that our becoming happier is not really of much concern to God! Or, to put it another way, the idea that the God of the universe, busy with all kinds of important things, actually cares about something which seems at times to be so small, so trivial as your happiness and my happiness seems a little absurd, or self-serving -- which is why it's really important to remember that self-sacrificing Jesus, himself, speaks about this subject; that in these statements that we call the Beatitudes Jesus speaks passionately about our happiness; and that it is not accidental that he does this in Matthew's account as the very first matter of business in his teaching ministry. The location of Jesus' teaching on happiness within the story of Jesus speaks of its importance to him.

Let me put it like this. When Matthew puts together the story of Jesus so we can read it in the gospel according to Saint Matthew he does so quite deliberately in a particular order -- sometimes chronological, but sometimes thematic -- so that just before he preaches his "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7) he speaks about happiness (which functions as the preface to the Sermon); and his speaking about happiness follows immediately after (and includes) his speaking about the "Kingdom of God." That is, Jesus speaks about the "Kingdom of God" as if

what he has to say about happiness and indeed everything else he has to say in the Sermon on the Mount, are in fact the rules and the principles and the ethos of the Kingdom of God.

We may or may not think about it but the Kingdom of God is rather like a parallel universe, another dimension to life.

- Every single one of us belongs maybe not to a kingdom, but certainly to a nation. We belong to a race. We belong to a people. We belong to a family. We belong to **a community**. And Jesus is saying there is another community that we need to belong to, and have been invited into. The kingdom is a community of belonging.
- Every single one of these communities has leaders of one kind or another and so does this community. The kingdom has **a king**, and that king is Jesus.
- And every single community we belong to has laws, principles, spoken or unspoken. In families they may be unspoken although there may be some rules which are our family rules but there is an ethos for every group, for every community. So too in the Kingdom of God. All of us have been invited, every single one of us into this Kingdom/community, and we enter it when we acknowledge that Jesus is our king, the authority over our life. There are principles which guide our life together. And Jesus shares those principles. This is what his teaching is all about: **principles of what life is about in his kingdom.**

But what's important to see is this: that at the very beginning of Jesus' teaching in Matthew's gospel he speaks *first* of all about happiness, as if to say, "When you are in my kingdom, when you bow yourself down before me together, and hold me in authority over you as your king I will give you more happiness than you can almost deal with. This is my first passion. This kingdom is to be a happy community, and everything else I teach is based upon that premise." So Jesus speaks about happiness, is concerned about our happiness, gives it a priority in all his teaching and this is the happiness that we are going to be looking at in the weeks that lie ahead of us.

A week or two ago we began looking specifically at the Beatitudes, these statements about happiness at the beginning of Matthew's gospel. Let me read them to you again in their briefest form. Jesus says:

Happy are the poor in spirit; Happy are those who mourn; Happy are the meek; Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; Happy are the merciful; Happy are the pure in heart; Happy are the peacemakers and Happy are those who are persecuted.

Let me ask you this morning to repeat those out loud after me. We're going to say them once again. I will line it out and then you say it after me:

Happy are the poor in spirit; Happy are those who mourn; Happy are the meek; Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; Happy are the merciful; Happy are the pure in heart; Happy are the peacemakers; Happy are those who are persecuted.

Happy are those who are persecuted? Really? Do you believe it? Do you really believe it? You said it. But do you believe that this is where happiness lies? Sometimes we read these and I think we read them too quickly. But when we speak them out loud, the strangeness of what Jesus

is teaching sometimes comes through. Or let me put it like this – if you were to turn to a glossy magazine and find eight tips on happiness, how many of the statements that Jesus makes would be in those eight tips? Do you think this would be a best seller out there? *Jesus' Eight Tips on Happiness!*

Strange indeed! And none more strange than the one that is the topic of our sermon this morning – the second of these statements of happiness or Beatitudes, a statement about mourning, about grief. Says Jesus: “*Happy are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.*” Don’t you find that strange? Isn’t this a contradiction in terms? I mean aren’t those people who are mourning and grieving, almost by definition, not happy? They are in pain. They are in suffering. They are facing loss and something is weighing on their hearts and their minds which surely is taking their happiness away.

And yet Jesus the King says that in his kingdom, in his realm, “*Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*” So what is the king saying? What kind of mourning or grief is this? What are we to be grieving for, or mourning for which if we do it will lead to comfort and to happiness? What does Jesus have in mind?

Well I would suggest this morning that when we turn to the pages of scripture we find at least three ways to grieve, or three ways to mourn; three subjects or topics about which we may grieve or about which we may mourn which are *central to the teaching of the Bible*, and I think central to Jesus’ own teaching as well. And I’d suggest that each of these may be in Jesus’ mind as he says to his friends, including you and me, “*Happy are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.*” Three types of grief, three types of mourning which if we pursue them and don’t avoid them (and sometimes we do try to avoid all mourning and grieving), will lead eventually to our happiness and comfort.

THREE TYPES OF GRIEF

1. The first of these types is one that we might call normal grief: when we lose someone dear and precious to us, or when we lose something which is dear and precious to us, or some thought or idea or dream which is dear and precious to us, we go into mourning. And Jesus is saying that this mourning, this kind of grief is okay, it’s okay even for his followers. And it’s not only “okay” but necessary for our comfort and happiness. So that’s the first type of mourning or grief. It’s what we would call normal mourning or grief.

2. But then the second type of grief would have to do not just with our friends, our relationships and our ideas, but with the world, the society, in which we live. We are to mourn and grieve the loss of innocence and the presence of evil in this world in which we live. The fact that there is so much pain and there is so much unfairness and there is so much injustice, and as Jesus’ followers we are to mourn because of that and grieve because of that.

3. And then in the third place I think the kind of grief or mourning that Jesus would have in mind has to do not with the world “out there”, but the world “in here,” within your life and my life – mourning that we are sinners are sinners, who have let God down, who have let Jesus

down again and again, repeatedly; and this is to cause us grief. We are to be in mourning over our own sin.

So here are three types or areas of mourning or grieving that if, in fact, we enter into them, I do believe as Jesus teaches we will find not only God's comfort but we will find as well the kind of happiness that no one and nothing can take away. Let's think of each of these aspects of grieving or mourning now, beginning with our own personal losses.

1. Good and Normal Grief for our own personal losses. I hope it's never normal but nevertheless we'll call it "normal grief," referring to the kind of grieving or mourning that occurs, or should occur when somebody significant to us dies, when we lose somebody who is precious to us, or when somebody leaves us, a child grows up and goes away, a friend or colleague disowns us. Whatever the specifics, there is a normal need to grieve when there is a rupture and a break in relationships, or when hopes and dreams are dashed.

And in this context, Jesus, I think, is saying nothing more profound than this: that it is okay to cry! It is okay to cry. When there has been loss, a hemorrhage within our lives it is okay to cry, to tell God that it hurts and even to get angry at God, because life has been disrupted in what for us in what seems to be such a cruel way. Not only is it okay, but, says Jesus, it's actually necessary: You've got to grieve! You've got to grieve if you're going to be happy, going to be comforted. You've got to let those tears out. They are gifts of God.

This is a message which sometimes men need to hear more than women. The message men often get is that "big boys don't cry." But it's also a message which sometimes in some forms of Christianity is really important to say as well, because there are some Christians who would say to somebody else crying is not okay! "Don't cry, God will take care of it; God is in charge!" – Which, of course, is true: God is in charge! In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says to us that God cares for us more than he cares for the sparrows in the air or the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:25-34). So we are not to be anxious. But – what needs to be said is this, that even trusting fully in God in time of loss doesn't negate the need for grief! Doesn't deal with everything that's going on when we are facing loss and pain. You see, when somebody leaves us or somebody dies or a hope or a dream vanishes it's as if a part of us is gone. As if a limb has been cut off. As if something has been amputated. True, God will take care of us, but now we are on a path with God that we have never been on before, and even if we can say to ourselves, with deep faith, that we know God will take care of us, the reality is that life will never be the same again and it is painful to face up to, and to adapt to – for everyone. And Jesus says to us, "Even when you trust me and I will take care of you, I gave you tears on purpose. When there's loss it's okay to cry. True for you, and true for me too!" *Happy are those who mourn!*

As our scripture reading we read the story in John 11 of Jesus with his friends Mary and Martha at the death of their brother Lazarus, Jesus' close friend. Jesus obviously had great faith: He knew that he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Nobody can accuse him of not having faith. But when he comes to the tomb what do we read there? We read that Jesus himself wept (11:35). He cried! He cried! Our faith-filled Savior still cried with sorrow at the sense of loss.

And he gives us permission to do the same. So, *Happy are those who mourn!* Yes, somewhat of a contradiction, a conundrum, but the truth becomes clearer when expressed in its negative form: there is no happiness unless we mourn, unless we cry, unless we grieve when there is loss. We trust God, yes. But the tears and the sadness are important too as a step which has to be taken before comfort comes and happiness returns.

And that I think is on Jesus' mind to begin with, when he speaks about those who are mourning but yet happy and comforted.

2. Good Grief For God's World. But this is surely not all that is on Jesus' mind. To be sure, there is *personal* grief and pain. But then there is *public* grief and pain; and Jesus says we need to feel that as well. We need to mourn and grieve about the state of the world, about the fact that there is much injustice in this world. Much evil. Much unfairness. There are things going on which are "just not right," and we need to mourn and grieve and be angry about those things – to such an extent that we are moved to action, and begin to participate with God in doing what is right in places in which there is much that is wrong. We need to grieve about those things as well.

So I read to you from the great prophet Amos, where, in the 6th Chapter, he writes at a time when the people of Israel were wealthy and everything seemed to be good, but there was a part of society that was not right or good. So Amos says to the people

"You have been given much. [DR: So have we!] You live in comfort and ease. [DR: So do we!] But, he says, you also live with blinders on. There are things in this world which you have closed your eyes to. And God wants you to open your eyes. I know we can't handle it all. I know there's such a thing as compassion fatigue. But there is some part of God's world which should make us so weak that we are moved to action. So Amos says (speaking for God) "But you do not grieve for the ruin of my people!" And you need to. This is "good grief," and you need to grieve, says Amos. And Jesus echoes him: you need to grieve – "*Happy are those who mourn for they shall be comforted!*" And not only comforted, but will become channels of God's comfort to others as well (so Paul in 2 Corinthians 1).

Go back to the 1800s and you find there a man by the name of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, which he founded after he began to grieve for the poor living in misery in the city of London. On one occasion he was asked about the secret of his success and he responded like this. He said:

I'll tell you the secret. God has had all there was of me to have. There have been men with greater opportunities no doubt but from the day I got the poor of London on my heart, [DR: from the day he began to grieve about what he saw within the city, from the day, as Bob Pierce, founder of World Vision put it, 'his heart was broken with the things that break the heart of God' – from that day] when I also caught a vision of what Jesus Christ could do I made up my mind that God would have all there was of William Booth and if there is anything of power

in the Salvation Army today it is because God has had all the adoration of my heart, all the power of my will and all the influence of my life.

But it began with grieving; with a heart that was broken because of unfairness and pain and sorrow and injustice. Not for the amorphous mass of the “whole wide world” but for some specific area which God laid upon his heart. So, what about us? You and me? What about our whole church? Shouldn’t there be parts of our city, parts of our world over which we grieve together until we know, like William Booth, that God has a vision through Jesus Christ to use us in his service so that in our grief we will not only be comforted, we will actually become God’s comforters to others as well?

So there is “normal grief” when there is loss: Go ahead and cry and weep like me says Jesus. Then there is this sense of injustice about the world which leads us to action: remember Jesus turning over the tables in the temple where people were buying and selling instead of worshipping? Jesus reacts, as if to say, “Enough!” And in so doing challenges us to ask when have we been stirred up like this? And then in the third place there is to be grieving and mourning, not just about “them out there,” but about “us, me right in here,” in my own life.

3. Good Grief for our Own Sin. So Jesus said to the people listening to his “Sermon on the Mount”: “*Do not judge so that you may not be judged*” (Matthew 7:1).

By this he does not mean (as I often hear people say) that we are not to be discerning in any sense. In all of life we have to be discerning. If we are employers and we have employees, or teachers and we have students, or coaches and we have players – of course we have to be discerning (and in that sense judges) about what our employees, or students, or players do.

But Jesus goes on to put this in context, and clarifies that the issue is about speed and eagerness to judge: don’t be rushing to judgment, eager for judging others, and certainly don’t be judging others before we look at ourselves. Always look at yourself first. So Jesus says, “*You hypocrite! first take the log out of your own eye and then you will see clearly and take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.*” How easy to get things out of perspective. Go slow, and look into your own heart first, and then we will see that we ourselves have not lived up to our own expectations, let alone those of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you remember the story of Simon Peter when Jesus was betrayed and went to his death. On the evening before Jesus dies, Jesus is eating with his disciples, a meal we call the “Last Supper.” He says to them that *one of them* is going to betray him and that *all of them*, all of his followers, his close followers, are going to run away. They are all going to abandon him. And Simon Peter his closest friend and the leader of the pack says to Jesus, “I will never do that, Jesus! I will remain faithful!” But Simon Peter doesn’t remain faithful. Before morning comes, and the cock crows, Simon Peter denies that he knows Jesus three times. He fails his master. He hurts and brings pain to the one who is his Lord and his Savior. And then we read these words (Luke 22:62), that Simon Peter “wept bitterly.” He wept bitterly when he realized what he had done. He grieved over his sin. But not with just a “poor me!” but with a strong sense of “poverty

of spirit” that led him to run to God for mercy, and in running to God for mercy, through this moment of his greatest weakness he surely saw more clearly than ever the depth of God’s love for him, a love that would never ever let him go (see the poignant episode in John 21:15-19). Indeed, in time, he along with the apostle Paul would become one of the two greatest leaders of the early church: this man Peter who looked into his soul and grieved over his sin and brought it to God and found relief and release from his pain. Comfort. Happiness.

“Happy are those who mourn!” What a strange statement it! Jesus is saying that there is a time to mourn; there is good grief, without which, says Jesus, we will not be comforted, we will not find happiness.

1. Grief in the face of loss and some of you may be going through this. A person who has died or left you. A hope or a dream that has vanished. It’s okay to cry says Jesus. These are painful times and life will not be the same again. Good grief is part of the process to healing. It is not an act of faithlessness, or small faith to grieve: Jesus the King wept! And in the face of our losses, he says to us, “Grieve!”

2. In the face of the lostness of this world and the injustices of this world, “Grieve,” says Jesus; to such an extent that like William Booth you will become a channel of God’s grace, an ambassador of the Kingdom of God in this world

3. And in the face of your own sin “Grieve!” Sunday by Sunday here at worship we confess your sin. We don’t deny it but confess it, knowing, as the psalmist says (145:8), that God is rich in mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

“Happy!” says Jesus, (*yes, Happy!*) — *are those who mourn for they are the ones who will be comforted!*”

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