

‘God's Aching Visionaries’  
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Matthew 5:3-12

Title: ‘God's Aching Visionaries’

Series: The Beatitudes: People in Synchrony

Our text today is found in the Gospel according to Matthew Chapter 5, verse 4, wherein Jesus speaks the second of His eight Beatitudes. As I have been emphasizing in this series, it is very important to hear the words in their original context. So, let us read Matthew chapter 4, beginning at verse 12. [4:12-17, 23-5:4]

“Blessed are those who mourn: more accurately, blessed are those who are mourning” Jesus is using the present participle. Even more exactly “Blessed are those who are in a state of mourning” Really?

Jesus second Beatitude is probably the best known and the most quoted of the eight; rivaled only by “blessed are the peacemakers.” Jesus’ second Beatitude is certainly the most jarring, the one that on first hearing simply makes no sense. Blessed? Approved? Fortunate... are those who are mourning? Congratulations? Right-on? in –Synchrony are those who are in a state of mourning? Can you imagine standing before a group of Haitians today and repeating Jesus’ words?

As writer J. Bernie Shepherd responds to Jesus ‘Lord, you might as well say ‘full are the hungry, healthy are the sick, alive are the dead’. (Prayers from the Mount, 17) Or, as philosopher Nicolas Wolterstorff puts it in the book he wrote after the death of his 25-year-old son:” How strange.. cheers to those who weep; hail to those whose eyes are full of tears, hats off to those who suffer, bottoms up to the grieving. How strange how incredibly strange” (Lament for a Son)

What makes Jesus’ second Beatitude all the more jarring, is that the verb translated “mourn” – *penthein*- is one of the strongest words for grief in the Greek language. It is used of those who grieve the loss of loved ones, shedding those tears that well up from deep within our souls. It describes that piercing sorrow which issues in audible lament. As one New testament scholar observes: “ ‘*Penthein*’ does not have to be open lamentation, (yes) neither is it quiet sorrow of heart. What is meant is passionate grief which leads to corresponding action” (Rudolph Bultmann, TDNT, Vol VI, 43) Amazing! “Blessed , right-on, in –synchrony are those who mourn” You lucky bums! Really? Are you sure Jesus?

Now, as I have been stressing thus far in this series on the Beatitudes, the qualities Jesus blesses are not natural human qualities. Rather, they are the result of the Gospel having grabbed hold of us: the result of hearing Jesus’ good news of the Kingdom of heaven

breaking in upon the earth. Jesus did not come into Galilee and Judea looking for Beatitude people whom He could then call into the Kingdom. No, he first called people to Himself. And as a result of contact with him the Beatitudes began to emerge in their lives.

Therefore, the picture the second Beatitude suggests is not that of Jesus coming into our city spotting people who are mourning and reaching out to them with comfort. He did do that blessed be His name. He spotted the widow in the town Nain, following behind the funeral procession that was carrying her son's corpse to the cemetery and he reached out to her. He saw the tears flowing down the faces of Mary and Martha as they stood outside the tomb of their brother Lazarus and He so reached out to them He Himself began to weep. But those encounters are not the primary picture suggested by the second Beatitude. Rather, the picture is that of Jesus coming into our city reaching out calling people to Himself who then begin to mourn. Yes, they, we, begin to rejoice big time! But they also began to mourn deeply.

Why? Why is the "piercing sorrow" a sign that human beings are being grappled by the Gospel? Why does Jesus identify "passionate grief" as one of the questions of those upon whom the light dawns, upon whom the Kingdom of God has come?

Before wrestling with the question let me make a number of preliminary observations about this second Beatitude.

First off, this Beatitude gives us permission to grieve, freedom to grieve. We in North America, and parts of the world under Western influence, need to hear this. For we are not free to grieve. Even in many Christian circles we are free to grieve. A wife breaks down in the middle of the Memorial Service for her husband of 40 years, and from the back pew is heard, "too bad, I really thought she would be strong". Jesus would never say that. Never. He Himself was overcome by and expressed passionate grief. "Big boys do not cry", says who? Not Jesus, a man's man. He gives us the freedom and space to grieve.

Another observation. I think he is saying in this Beatitude that we will not know the comfort He gives unless we let ourselves grieve. I think He is saying to us: "Comfort is found when you allow yourself to feel and express grief". I have walked through 'the valley of the shadow of death' with many people. I have conducted nearly 400 Memorial services. And I have observed that those who go through the valley most redemptively are those who do not try to stifle the grief. Grief does not kill. It feels like it will, but it does not. It is trying to stuff the grief that kills. Jesus is saying to us, "Comfort is not found by insulating your heart but by opening your heart". One of the ways we can serve one another is encouraging one another to grieve better.

Another observation. Jesus is letting us know right from the beginning that living in His Kingdom in the world will involve sorrow. He does not promise us unbroken happiness. Yes, there is a great joy. Joy comes from the pages of the New Testament. "the time is fulfilled"! – rejoice. "the Kingdom of God has come near"! Rejoice. "The Lover of our

souls is here in our midst"! – Rejoice. "Our God reigns"! Rejoice. "The Holy Spirit is here"! – Rejoice. Yet, Jesus is saying, His coming also ?? sorrow, heart- piercing sorrow.

One final observation. I think Jesus is saying to us that this sorrow is part of the process by which we grow. As Keith Krull said to me the other day as we were talking about the Beatitudes "sadness is a launching pad to growth". There are times as we minister to one another, that we try to anesthetize one another's sorrow too quickly. As C.S. Lewis once observed " God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pains; pain is His megaphone to rouse our deaf world". We need to listen to our pain, our sorrow, our sadness for just may be one of the ways God is growing us right now.

"Blessed are those who mourn."

Why? Why is mourning a sign that human beings have been grabbed by the Gospel? Why is passionate grief a sign that Jesus and His Kingdom are getting a hold on us?

I know of three reasons.

Number 1. It is related to what we saw in the first Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit". When we meet Jesus in all His fullness we are forced to face the reality of sin. And especially the reality of sin in our own lives. Not that Jesus walks into our lives and tells us that we are "sinners". Not at all. Nowhere in the Gospel do we find Jesus calling anyone "sinner".

It is just that in His presence we cannot but realize our sinful condition. It is part of the reason we resist deeper intimacy with Him: we are afraid of what He will do with what is exposed in His presence. In Him we see what humanity was created to be. And when we see what we were created to be we grieve over what humanity has become because of the power of sin.

What was the apostle Paul's response to Jesus even after years of walking with Him? Romans 7:21 – "O, wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of death?" Paul is not suffering from low self-esteem. He is wrestling with the fact that even though he knows what is good, and even though he wills to do what he knows is good, he keeps doing the very evil he does not will (7:19). Anyone identify? I do! There are times when I am appalled at the depth of my capacity to go against what I know to be the will of God. In the presence of Jesus we see and rejoice and mourn. Is the Anglican Prayer-book over-reaching when it has worshippers say "We acknowledge and ??? our manifold sins and wickedness.

This is not "worm-theology", the theology that says that in order to know God we have to first feel like a worm, and squirm and wriggle in the mud for a while. God does not think of us as worms! Jesus never called anyone "worm" He did call sons of Pharisees "snakes" but never "worms". The second Beatitude is not advocating a 'put-yourself-down' spirituality. It is simply recognizing that in the process of Jesus the Holy One we

cannot but grieve over our unholy condition. In His presence we rejoice, yes. But we also grieve.

The wonder of the Gospel is that the Holy One chooses to draw near to us and to draw near to Himself and to live among us unholy ones indeed to live in us unholy ones! The wonder is that He does not wait until we are holy before He comes. He comes in all His Holiness into our un-Holiness, our un-Holiness is automatically exposed and we grieve.

“Blessed”, He says. “Blessed are those who so grieve” Right-on. It means the Holy One has a hold of you! It means you are in-synch with the really real. It means you are alive.

Number 2 reason why mourn is a sign the Gospel is breaking through. As we get closer to Jesus we get closer to His heart. And we discover that it is a broken heart. Oh, yes, Jesus is a man of joy! So much so that He was accused by the stuffy religious folk of being a glutton and a drunkard. But He is, as the prophet Isaiah says, “a man of sorrow, acquainted with grief” (53:4). Yes, He is the eternally joyful creator, who out of infinite joy creates us to enter into His joy. The psalmist is right – “in His presence is fullness of joy: in Your right hand there are pleasures forever” (16:11). But there is in His heart, because of the destructive power of sin, great sorrow over the world over the church. How often throughout scripture do we find the phrase “and it grieved the Holy one”?

Matthew tells us that when Jesus saw the multitudes, bringing their sick to Him, He “has compassion on them” (9:35-36) The word is *slagnkna*, guts. The word Bob Marwick loves to say! Jesus “has compassion on them” “His guts were ripped up”.

That too is the wonder of the Gospel. The living God chooses to so enter all the wreckage that he feels it Himself. He feels it is His own.

John tells us that Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus. The word John uses means “to be so overcome that one’s chest heaves”. Jesus stands alongside the grave of His good friend and is overcome so much so that His chest heaves with grief.

Why? Because of the pain He could feel in the hearts of Lazarus’ sisters Mary and Martha. And because of the pain He Himself was feeling. The heaving of His chest is the creator’s broken-heart crying out “death ought not be”. Get close to that heart and we cannot but be moved in the same way.

Luke tells us that as Jesus came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday He wept over the city. The word Luke uses means a spontaneous out-breaking, uncontrollable weeping. Why? Jesus is the King, the Sovereign King, the King of Glory. Why would He weep? After gaining His composure, He says, “because you do not know the things that make for “peace” (19:42) (also 13:34). Get close to that heart and feel what it feels for the city and you cannot but mourn with Him.

Number 3 reason why mourning is a sign the Gospel is breaking through. In Jesus, we see what the Kingdom of God is all about, what God's New World Order is all about. In Jesus we see what was supposed to be and what will be when the kingdom comes in all its fullness. And we grieve over what is. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it: the disciples of Jesus "see that for (all) the jollity on board, the ship is beginning to sink" (Cost of Discipleship, 121)

Oh, disciples begin to see signs of the Kingdom in our midst as I do right now here at First Baptist all kinds of wonderful signs of Kingdom life and in those signs I rejoice. Yet the more we see of what can be the more our hearts break over what is.

I look over our city and over the world and my heart wants to cry out 'it does not have to be this way' The poor do not have to go on being poor. There is enough to go around. Jesus' Father has seen to that. It is just that the systems of distribution are so unjust. The world does not have to spend 1.8 million a minute building weapons. Over 3,000 times what we spend on health, education and social services combined. It does not have to be this way. Domestic quarrels do not have to end in violence there are many more steps to take before grabbing an knife or a gun. Racial tensions do not have to continue. We can find ways to overcome prejudice and suspicion. The environment does not have to be abused. We can change our driving habits if we want to. We can change the way in package goods if we want to. We can find better ways of disposing of toxic chemicals if we want to. Women and children do not have to go on being sexually exploited. Those profiting from prostitution and pornography – bring violence against women – made last year alone, three times the profit of Google, Microsoft and Apple combined. It does not have to be this way. Women should not be treated this way: 92% of the women being prostituted want out.

All of this is, of course, symptomatic of the deeper spiritual crisis of our time, the crisis of the lack of knowing God. Billions of people on our planet go about their daily lives, most in "quiet desperation" unaware of the great FACT of Jesus and His Kingdom. It does not have to be this way. Every person ought to know the good news. Tens of thousands of people in this city, in the heart of the city have not had the opportunity to follow Jesus. The "fields are ripe unto harvest", says Jesus. "but the workers are few", too few. It does not have to be this way.

Earlier I quoted philosopher Nicolas Wolterstorff. A number of years ago now he and his wife lost their 25-year-old son Eric in a mountain climbing accident. In his book, Lament for a Son, Wolterstorff openly shares his grief, agonizing over the way the world is in light of the way the world is supposed to be. In the chapter wherein he reflects on Jesus' second Beatitude, He asks, "Who then are the mourners?" The mourners Jesus blesses? Wolterstorff answers, "The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God's new day, and who ache with all their being for that new day's coming, and break out into tears when confronted with its absence. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm of peace there is no one blind and who ache whenever they see someone unseeing. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one hungry, and who ache whenever they see someone starving. They are the ones who realize that in

God's realm there is no one falsely accused, and who ache whenever they see someone imprisoned unjustly. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one who fails to see God, and who ache whenever they see someone unbelieving. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one who suffers oppression and who aches whenever they see someone beat down. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one without dignity and who ache whenever they see someone treated with indignity. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm of peace there is neither death nor tears and who ache whenever they see someone crying tears over death. The mourners are aching visionaries.

"Blessed" say Jesus. Your aching says you are in synch with my Gospel. Your aching says you are alive in my vision for the world.

"Blessed for you shall be comforted".

Comforted. When? In the end when the kingdom of heaven is fully realized. When, as the Voice from the Throne of the universe says, "God shall wipe away every tear, and there shall no longer be any death, there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain" (Revelation 22:4)

But we shall also be comforted before the end. Even now. How? The word translated "comfort" is the verb "parakaleo" a rich word. The primary meaning of "parakaleo" is to exhort, to encourage, to embolden. It is used of soldiers cheering each other on. Which is the original meaning of the English word "comfort". Com- fort is: Com- with, forts – strength. Com –fort –strengthen by being with.

Jesus is saying that as we dare to open ourselves up to pain and grief, we feel ourselves strangely strengthened.

How? Why? Well, Get this. From the verb 'parakaleo' comes the noun 'paraklete'. Ring any bells? "Paraklete" is the word Jesus uses for the Holy Spirit, with whom and in whom Jesus baptized His disciples. Before the end – when every tear is wiped away – the Paraklete, the personal embodiment of the Kingdom, comes alongside those who are mourning.

When we become aware of the depth of sin, the Paraklete speaks His word of comfort: "Jesus paid it all, your guilt is removed, your iniquity is forgiven, your sin is covered by the blood of the lamb".

When we feel just how broken the world is, the Paraklete speaks His word of comfort: he reminds us that even now the Father of the Son are at work: that creation is groaning only because it is in the throes of childbirth: that the turmoil in the world is due in part to the Kingdom invading and disturbing the status quo.

When we feel despair over how far we are from the Kingdom's way, the Paraklete speaks His word of comfort: The Kingdom has come near, the kingdom is breaking in all over the world, and nothing can ultimately stand in its way.

As you can probably tell by now I have great vision of what can be. Which means I am regularly hit by sorrow over what is. Sometimes I want to say "take the vision away, it would be easier not to see what can be". It is then I sense the Paraklete speaking to my soul: "the vision is true it does not have to be this way. Things can change. Do not carry the weight of making the vision come to be on your own shoulders. Trust Jesus. Trust the Father. And I hear the word the Spirit spoke to the prophet Habakkuk: "The vision pants towards the good, and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it. For it certainly will come, it will not delay" (2:3)

And when we feel the broken heart of God, the Paraklete assures us that It is the heart of God. Of God. And that, therefore, what God says to us is also true for Him. "weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning". God will have His way! Everlasting joy will be the everlasting state of being for you and me and for God.

If the first Beatitude blesses those who are poor before God and who own their utter helplessness, the second Beatitude blesses those who are vulnerable before life and who dare to feel the pain. Theirs is the Kingdom. And theirs is the embrace of the God of all comfort.