

The Happy Sad

Psalm 130

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 5:1-4

February 22, 2015

For those of you who weren't here for Ash Wednesday, let me bring you up to date with this Lenten series of sermons. Each time we gather to worship between now and Maundy Thursday, we're going to explore one Beatitude in depth. Each Beatitude gives us a clue to living as a Christian. Each Beatitude helps us understand some of the mysteries, some of the paradoxes, of living God's will in a sinful world. And most important for our Lenten journey, each Beatitude reflects something of the one who gave them to us. Jesus Christ not only preached the Beatitudes, he lived them. Each speak of a value that he held dear, a value that was reflected in the way he lived his life, and in the way he faced his death. Each Beatitude begins with a blessing, a description of how we live, then a promise. On Ash Wednesday, we looked at the first Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." To be poor in spirit isn't like clinical depression. It means to put God at the center, not ourselves. It means being truly open to God's care. It's trusting God humbly and lovingly.

Today's Beatitude is "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." The Happy Sad. At first glance, it sounds like a contradiction in terms, doesn't it? How can you be happy and sad at the same time? But if "blessed" can mean "happy," and "to mourn" can be "sad," can't we translate this beatitude, "how happy are the sad?" You can almost see the struggle in the disciples' faces, as they wonder, "Jesus, are you messing with our brains again?" But then Jesus adds, "for they shall be comforted." The paradox becomes a promise.

The Message translates it this way: "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you."

To be able to mourn, we have to let our defenses down. We have to be able to care about others, or to recognize and care about our own inner losses. Jim Forest wrote a book called "The Ladder of the Beatitudes." Forest says that one beatitude builds on the other. You have to be poor in spirit to be able to mourn. Here's what he says about this one.

"Blessed are they who mourn." Here is the Beatitude of feeling grief for the sorrows of other people. I can hardly feel someone else's pain without poverty of spirit, because otherwise I am on always on guard to keep what I have for myself, and to keep me for myself. If I begin to feel for someone, to feel and not just pretend to feel, I will want to share with him what I have, and even share myself. The immediate consequence of poverty of spirit is becoming sensitive to the losses of people around us, not just those whom I happen to know and like but strangers. This is the Beatitude of tears." (unquote)

This kind of mourning, grief for the injustices of society and for those who are victimized by these injustices, is something we see often in Jesus. He felt compassion for the hungry crowds, for they were like sheep without a shepherd. He wept for Jerusalem, because he knew that the day of its destruction would come, when the anger of the people would well up into rebellion, and the armed might of the Romans would wipe out Jerusalem, the city of peace. In Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus delivers a two-sided beatitude, a blessing and a curse. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh," balanced by "woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." That seems harsh. Jesus wasn't saying that we shouldn't enjoy life, or that we shouldn't be happy, but he was challenging those who violated God's shalom, who purchased their own happiness by cheating and beating down the poor. As followers of Jesus, we are called to compassion, and we are called to work for justice.

There's another dimension to "blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." As we mourn for our own sins, as we confess that we have fallen away from God, we will find not judgment, but comfort; not condemnation, but welcome. Think of the parable of the prodigal son. The youngest child had wasted his share of his family inheritance, and ended up starving, envious of the coarse husks that the pigs ate. He came to his senses. He wanted to go back home, even if it were to be as a hired hand, or a servant. As he limped wearily back, he rehearsed and rehearsed his speech. "Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand." Over and over, he muttered it to himself, "Father I have sinned...Father, I have sinned." He had blown it, and he knew it. But when he came down the lane, his father rushed to greet him, and instead of turning his back on the wayward child, instead of scolding, instead of saying, "What do you have to say for yourself," he hugged his son, and covered his rags with a new robe, and threw a party. Blessed are those who mourn for their own sins, for God will forgive. God will accept. God will embrace.

And, of course, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" has a very literal sense in times of loss and grief, when we have lost someone or something that is near and dear to us. We discover at some point in our lives, maybe at many points, that grief is the price for loving. If we didn't care, it wouldn't hurt—or at least we'd block out the hurt. But because we care, because we love, we are able to mourn; we are able to grieve. And because we love one another, and because we are loved, we can comfort one another. We can hug, we can cry, we can bring covered dishes, and we bring comfort; or we experience comfort from the love of family; from the love of church members; from the love of friends.

The Psalm that we heard earlier, Psalm 130, expresses the truth of this Beatitude in a profound way. As a matter of fact, it's called *de profundis*, after its first words, "Out of the depths." It begins in the depths, in the

soul's anxiety and loneliness, the dark night of the soul. But then, as dawn approaches, glimmers of hope arrive as the psalmist waits with anticipation. Finally, it ends with trust and joy.

Because Jesus loved deeply, Jesus mourned. He shared the grief of Mary and Martha at the death of their brother Lazarus. He was so moved by their sorrow, so filled with empathy at their loss, that he wept. "Jesus wept." John 11:35. That is the whole verse. John Donne, the 17th Century poet and priest, said, "There is no shorter verse in the Bible, nor is there a larger text." Jesus was a dear friend, and so he was able to mourn, to grieve, to weep. Some Christians say that we shouldn't mourn or grieve when someone we love dies, because we should be happy that they are in heaven. That's not healthy. Jesus wept, we can too. It's a sign of love.

But remember what happened later in that story. Jesus prayed to God and God brought Lazarus alive from the tomb. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." We are given the promise of eternal life. We can mourn, but not like those without hope, as Paul says. We can feel the pain of separation, but we know that ultimately nothing can separate us from God's love. We can feel the pain of loss, but we know that ultimately, nothing is lost to God. We can feel sadness and sorrow at the loss of someone we love, but underneath the sadness and sorrow is a deep and abiding joy, a joy that is rooted in hope. This hope is ours because in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we know that our hope is true. Amen.