

“Words of Jesus ... Beatitudes II”

Prayer: God of promise and steadfast love, we give you thanks for the teaching of Jesus. For the blessings we enjoy and the sufferings we presently endure, we give you thanks. For the promises by which we live and for the hope of glory we receive in faith, we give you thanks. Give us merciful hearts toward others as you are merciful with us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today for our sermon time we are at part two in our reflections on the Beatitudes and the two short verses where we hear blessings for “those who mourn and those who are meek.” Judith Viorst has written (see *Necessary Losses*, page 2) ... “When we think of loss we think of the loss, through death, of people we love. But loss is a far more encompassing theme in our life. For we lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on. And our losses include not only our separations and departures from those we love, but our conscious and unconscious losses of romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of freedom and power, illusions of safety—and the loss of our own younger self, the self that thought it always would be unwrinkled and invulnerable and immortal.”

Our whole lives have been filled with losses for which we mourn.

I want to begin today by saying that we all mourn and the pains are deep and always present in our thoughts and our hearts. Let me begin with a more personal story. There was a time in my ministry when I sincerely felt called to move on to a new and larger congregation with a more demanding mission. It meant leaving a beautiful home and Ellen resigning from a position where she was dearly loved. Our children had grown up in that community and call that home. I was leaving a position where the church had experienced significant growth with many issues of transition from a very long-term founding pastor behind us.

Just as we were preparing the final stages of the move, both of my parents died 18 days apart. And besides ... the congregation I was leaving was furious with my decision and they had no qualms about telling me!

I thought I was going to be permanently depressed and would forever question my decision-making process and most of all, the integrity of God’s call to this new ministry. For weeks I walked around as if there was this immense burden on my shoulders. I was running on automatic pilot and my source of emotional and professional support ... my parents ... was no longer accessible. Just thinking about those few months opens up huge wounds and a genuine sense of what it means to mourn.

At the same time, while serving this congregation I have heard the stories about experiences in World War II. I have heard women talk about what it meant to have your husband and father of your children gone for several years. I have heard about experiences during the Depression and how difficult it was to go hungry, never knowing if and when the family would have to move. I have heard mothers share the story of the death of one or more of

their children. And then I have heard a member say, “I cannot go to bed tonight. I have slept with Susie (and that was not her name) at my side for 68 years.”

So many in this church family have known the depths of human mourning and it is what the Bible calls “lament”. That is what mourning is all about. Mourning is about death, ... change, and loss ... decline and weakness, ... and the facing of the inevitable.

Eugene Peterson has translated it ... “*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.*” Or as our NRSV translation says, “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*”

God is our source of comfort, the “dear one” who is always present. And yet we ask, “Why would Jesus have the audacity to say this?” Where is the blessing in this open wound ... and what is so comforting about the experience of mourning? Is the blessing upon those who mourn simply tied to the future hope that they too will be comforted? Or is there, somehow, a blessing in the midst of it ... Is there blessing in the grief and the sadness that washes over us?

Jesus knew about grieving and loss, even as the crowds surrounded him and he saw the broken and the wounded. He saw the mothers with dying children and the children who had been left parentless. We have been there and we know what it means to mourn. In this moment when these **Words of Jesus** left his lips, I wonder, did it emerge from his own burdened mourning? Did he feel that exhaustion and that bit of pain creeping into his joints and that is why he left the crowds and sat down?

It is as if in these words, he sees the needs—the hunger, the thirst, the longing—and, somehow, he sees blessing in all of it. Perhaps we cannot even understand these words until we acknowledge our own mourning ... or become meek. Maybe, maybe we cannot understand the words and feel the deep and genuine sense of being blessed.

Perhaps it only makes sense to us when we hit rock-bottom and are running on automatic pilot. When we are so ashamed of what we did the night before that our lips tremble. When we finally realize that we have no control over our addiction. When we are in such mourning, that we stare at the ground as we walk and we cannot look up.

Could it be that there is a gift that comes, even in this loss? Could it be that there is something good in the anguish and the valley of the shadow of death? In the absence of a loved one, love is still present. When we are facing a chasm of great magnitude, there is the possibility of reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace. And to these the Word of Jesus come to bring peace and comfort. Or to use Peterson’s words: “*Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.*”

There is an acknowledgement that through the pains of life we are never alone, we are never outside the comforting presence of God. Then our text takes us to verse 5: “*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*” What does it mean for a human being to be meek? In many ways it is easier to define “meekness” by what it is not. It is not self-centered, boastful, assertive, undisciplined, wild, disrespectful of others, ... you know the rest. Meekness is something like what it means to be God-like ... and that person is like God’s presence in the world. Meekness is associated with a person who is mild, gentle, unassuming, and even on some levels, a passive person. Meekness is usually something forced upon someone ... the meek are those treated by others as if they were nobodies. But Jesus is talking about a “holy meekness” that is grounded in a relationship with God and the goodness of God.

Thomas Merton has written: “The humble man receives praise the way a clean window takes the light of the sun. The truer and more intense the light is, the less you see of the glass.” (see *New Seeds of Contemplation*, page 189)

The meek person is kind, caring, sympathetic, generous, and compassionate. We live in a world where the successful are usually those that become anything they want with non-stop aggressiveness. Modern media encourages us to be pushy and aggressive in obtaining our rights, as well as in getting as much as we can whether or not we have a right to it. We are told that the purpose of life is to magnify yourself and make ourselves as big and important as possible. That is how we have come to believe that our world works.

The Jews in Jesus’ day had similar ideas for their kingdom that was going to be violent and militaristic. They were waiting for a Messiah to come and wipe-out their enemies and restore their power. Then, this man who people claim is the Messiah launches into his victory speech. Those that are listening to him are blood-thirsty and longing for freedom from their oppression by the Romans. Thousands follow him at this point in his ministry and it is not just because he can do magic tricks, but they assume there is hope in a new kingdom forcing out the old.

What a downer this must have been to those in the crowd. This inaugural address was completely backwards and anti-climatic, especially this line about the meek. This does not pass any test of authenticity for those listening. What is meek and why is this so appalling? Matthew shows us by quoting Jesus saying things like “*You are the light of the world.*” and “*a city built on a hill cannot be hid.*” Jesus obviously wants his followers to be out there, not hidden, being light, not dark. So meekness is not being hidden or passive, or staying in a closet.

I regularly conclude worship with the same benediction: “*Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good; render to no person evil for evil; strengthen the faint-hearted; support the weak; heal the afflicted; honor and serve all people; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.*” Recently someone asked me about that word of hope. These words come from the *First Letter to the Thessalonians*, chapter five. These words describe the kind of meekness that Jesus was talking about. It is a proclamation of the Christian life as presented in these two verses.

Just a few minutes ago we listened to a deeply moving duet call *Pie Jesu* arranged by Andrew Lloyd Webber. These Latin words mean “dutiful”, “godly”, or “kind” and come from a requiem mass, usually sung in a funeral mass or recognition of the death of Jesus. It is the proclamation of the final hope and comfort that supports all who mourn ... and live the life of meekness. These **Words of Jesus** come to us today to bring hope, comfort, and peace.

They are there with the widow who sits in the Lazyboy where her husband used to relax, just so she can remember the sweetness of his presence. The blessings are there, when we are sorting through clothes, and we suddenly are enveloped with a waft of perfume that reminds us of Christmas with our mom. When the walls of our home seem to be haunted with our lover and we do not ever want to leave. The blessings are there in the facts that the ways in which we hurt each other seem to fade, and the resentment is replaced with understanding. The blessings are there, as we defrost the homemade casseroles that the church member delivered.

These *Words of Jesus* have traveled a long a way over the centuries and they have never been so comforting ... we know that we are blessed. These are the *Words of Jesus* for your lives and for mine.

Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12