



Listening to the radio last week I heard the song *Alone Again, Naturally*, by Gilbert O'Sullivan several times. If you are from my era you probably remember the song, which is a nice, catchy, bouncy song, at least musically. Lyrically, it is very depressing, and includes the following lines. Would you like me to sing them to you? Um...no.

*But as if to knock me down
Reality came around
And without so much as a mere touch
Cut me into little pieces
Leaving me to doubt
Talk about, God in His mercy
Oh, if he really does exist
Why did he desert me
In my hour of need
I truly am indeed
Alone again, naturally.*

While I like the tune of Mr. O'Sullivan's song, I would disagree with his theology. While Mr. O'Sullivan believes that God deserted him in his hour of need, I would beg to differ. I do not question Mr. O' Sullivan's feelings or grief – absolutely not – but I do question his sense of God and his mercy. Just because one *feels* deserted does not mean one *is*, in fact, deserted by God. We too often equate feelings and personal experience with reality and truth, but they are not the same. Just because we *feel* something does not mean that what we feel is *true*.

But I do understand Mr. O'Sullivan's sentiment. Grief – as universal as it is – can be very isolating and lonely. It is in a time of grief that a person will ask all of their deepest and most difficult questions of God. *Where is God*, one might ask, and that's a fair

question. God does not fear our questions, we should remember, and asking questions is one of the ways in which our faith grows and matures.

This morning we continue the series of messages based on the Beatitudes as we come to verse 4 – *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*. Again this week we will read the passage in which we find the Beatitudes – Matthew 5:1-12.

1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,

2 and he began to teach them. He said:

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

I want to speak about grief in relation to two categories this morning – the grief that comes with death, which is what I will call *specific* grief, and every other kind of grief, which I will call *general* grief, and I will begin with that type of grief.

Allow me to also add a word about our Stephen Ministry. When you are going through a time of grief – any type of grief – or any other time of struggle, we have trained Stephen Ministers available to assist you. If you would like to learn more about the Stephen Ministry, please contact either Laine Kephart or myself or the church office.

1. General grief.

We grieve over many matters, actually, not just the end of life. Many other areas of life come to an end, and those endings also trigger grief. Many people find themselves in mourning because they lose a job. In my home area, in the northern Ohio Valley, thousands upon thousands of people were once employed by the steel mills – at very good pay and very good benefits – for very many years. Then, in the early 80s, that economy began to unravel. The hiring ended and the layoffs began. Then came the closures of the mills. Today, years after the collapse of that economy and the loss of the jobs, the sense of grief is still very palpable, because nothing else has ever replaced those jobs. Some people mourn because a friend or family member moves to another part of

the country. This is most common when kids grow up, go off to college, and most likely move to another part of the country, away from parents. It never occurred to me to wonder if my parents had any grief when I left home. Maybe they had a party! Tanya and I have been married for over 33 years, and we have never lived near our families or any other relatives. There has always been an undercurrent of grief that our lives have taken us away from our families. We've wondered on more than one occasion whether or not it was the right thing to do, to move away from our families. Was it fair to our kids? Was it fair to our families?

But there are other kinds of mourning as well, and it is the kind that is not tied directly to our personal experience; it is the kind of mourning tied to the human condition. It is a mourning that was expressed by Jesus as he rode towards the city of Jerusalem for the Triumphal Entry. As he approached the city the heart of Jesus broke because of what he saw there. As Jesus *saw the city, he wept over it*, Luke 19:41 tells us. Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus said of the city *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing* (Matthew 23:37). Jerusalem, the holy city, had become in large measure a place of corruption and greed, bringing great grief to Jesus. The religious leaders had turned the Temple into a place of corruption rather than protecting it as a place of prayer and worship. The politics of the day had filled the city with coarseness, cynicism, and danger. Jesus challenged those who were in positions from which they could improve the lives of others but didn't. His grief at what he saw did not remain only a feeling; what Jesus saw moved him to action as he sought to alleviate the struggle that he saw all around him.

To look at the condition of our world today certainly should bring to us a sense of mourning. As we see such pervasive violence, brokenness, great physical and spiritual need, and the amount of hatred in our world it is not hard to feel a sense of grief. While we have progressed in many ways, it is clear that humanity is still mired in violence, hatred, and many other ills, just as in the day of Jesus.

If we cannot look upon the hungry people in our land and around the world and not mourn then our hearts have grown hard. If we cannot look upon the warfare and bloodshed and violence and not mourn the absence of peace and love then our hearts are indeed grown hard. We ought to mourn when we look at the world and see the condition of humanity. Our mourning ought to move us to step beyond ourselves and into the lives of others to heal that brokenness. It is possible to look at the condition of the world and say *forget it. I'm after what I can get and everybody else is on their own*. But faith calls us to move beyond the boundaries of our own lives and our own concerns to heal the brokenness in the world. It tells us that if we can do something, then we should do something.

2. *Specific grief.*

I would hazard a guess that if you ask 100 people to define grief, 99 of them would

most likely say it is associated with the loss of a friend or loved one. Very, very few, I assume, would talk about *general* grief. When we speak of grief, this is what we almost always mean – the specific grief that comes to us because of loss.

Grief was an ever-present part of daily life in the time of Jesus, as survival was precarious and the lifespan of most people was far less than what we enjoy today. Death, because of poverty, lack of medical care, and disease, was a fact of daily life, and was never far from claiming another among its ranks. One of the most famous passages in the Scriptures is when Jesus comes to the tomb of Lazarus, where he weeps (*Jesus wept*, John 11:35). It is a very touching scene, as Jesus weeps over the tomb of his friend Lazarus, and on behalf of the heartbreak of grief of his sisters, Mary and Martha. Loss is very, very difficult.

Interestingly, this beatitude is different from all of the others in one respect. I never noticed this until I was reading the beatitudes the other day. All of the others are voluntary. You don't have to be poor in spirit, you don't have to be meek, you don't have to be merciful, you don't have to be pure in heart, you don't have to be a peacemaker, and you don't have to be persecuted. All of those are conditions that come about because of how one lives, but being one who mourns is a condition we experience simply because we live. Mourning is the only one of the beatitudes that is, first, universal, and two, not a condition in which we find ourselves at least partially because of choice. It is part and parcel of the human condition. It cannot be avoided.

Mourning comes with the territory of living and loving. With the joy and beauty of love comes also the pain and grief of loss. We understand that they go together. It is very difficult to lose someone we love. We don't live long on this earth before we lose someone we love. The separation is difficult and the corresponding awareness of our own mortality comes home to us.

But Jesus says there is comfort. That comfort is both present and future and that promise implies divine intervention, I believe. One of the ways in which we experience that divine intervention is through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The word for Holy Spirit is *paraclete*, which means *helper*, or one *who is called to one's side*. That's a beautiful image of God, I believe; God coming beside us to help us. And as God intervenes with us, so we intervene in the lives of others when they grieve. Grief and loss teach us to enter into the lives of others. People will drop everything else to be with one who has lost a loved one. When I pass by a house and see a lot of cars parked out front I assume it means one of two things – someone is having a party or there has been the loss of a loved one. Sorrow moves us into the sufferings of others. Faith is about caring.

But there is a future tense to this beatitude as well – *blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*. Future hope does not remove the painful reality of the mourning that we experience in the present. We would like the full measure of that comfort right now – and there is a measure of present comfort – but we recognize that faith brings to us the final sense of comfort in the future. The only full, complete answer to grief and loss is the knowledge that there is something beyond ourselves and something beyond this life.

I have no idea how many funerals I have done over the years. I should have kept count, but I'm terrible at math so I don't keep counts, but I know it is in the hundreds. I have officiated at funerals for infants, young children, teenagers, young adults, middle age adults, older adults – I have officiated at funerals for every age group and just about every situation imaginable and along the way I've learned some things and one thing I have learned is this – it makes a big difference when one has a sense of hope. A big difference. Hope brings comfort. The promise of resurrection brings hope as does the promise that resurrection brings reunion with those we love, and that is incredibly powerful to people. There are certain Scripture passages I read at funerals, and one of them is Revelation 21:4 – *He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.* That hope is incredibly powerful in helping us cope with the sting of loss.

All sunshine, one person has said, *makes a desert* (Barclay, p. 93). As rain is necessary to produce growth from the earth, there are certain lessons only learned in sorrow. And one of those lessons is the promise of hope. There is a new day coming. There is a life that extends beyond this life. Death is not an end, but a beginning.

My father has been gone for over twenty-seven years. A few years after his passing my mom decided to sell our home place, which she needed to do. It was too much for her to keep up with and it was the right thing for her to do. I remember vividly going home one last time. I was five-years-old when we moved to our farm and it was difficult to go through the house one last time, especially as it was empty. As I walked into each room I had a video reel playing in my head of memories – birthdays, Christmases, family gatherings, and so many other occasions. It was, actually, depressing to go through that empty house and see it devoid of the life that pulsed through it for so many years. I walked out into my dad's workshop and looked at the small pile of tools that remained. My dad had added an addition to the house, with one part serving as a garage and the other as his workshop. I helped him on some of the building of that addition, although I don't imagine I was much help, as I have never been as skilled at building or working with my hands as he was. He had a lot of tools, most of which were gone, distributed to my siblings and others. I stood in his workshop, picking through some of the remaining tools, and though I'm not much of a tool person, I took a number of them home with me. I even took a torque wrench, even though I have no idea what a torque wrench does. As I picked through the tools I wondered, *is this what life comes to? We spend a lifetime collecting some things and then someone else has to worry about what to do with them. Is this what we leave behind?* But even as I asked myself that question I knew the answer – that is not what life comes to. Life is far more than the sum of our years and what we accumulate. Life is more, and means more, because of the hope that we have of eternity. It would be difficult, I believe, if our final breath in this life were the end of all things. But it is not, according to our faith. At the end of life on this earth we join what the book of Hebrews calls the *great cloud of witnesses* that surrounds us (Hebrews 12:1). It is a time when we will have a reunion, a homecoming; it will be a time when God indeed *will*

wipe every tear from (our) eyes. A time when there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain (Revelation 21:4).

Yes, blessed are the those who mourn, for they will indeed be comforted!