



The Trinity Pulpit



A Shoulder to Cry On Matthew 5:4 Dr. Jeff Roberts September 20, 2009

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” This is Jesus’ promise. Is it true? Is there really a shoulder to cry on when we mourn?

Dr. Chuck Poole tells the story of taking a walk one day to St. Joseph Catholic Church in Macon, Georgia. At the time, Dr. Poole was the pastor at First Baptist Macon. As he walked around the corner toward this beautiful old sanctuary, something caught his eye that he had never seen before. It was just a plain, black metal sign with two words painted in white: Cry Room. The only sign near this old large sanctuary said “Cry Room.” Dr. Poole later discovered that the Cry Room was the name for the nursery. The sign pointed families toward the place where they could leave their children, who could cry if need be during the time they were in worship; there the children would be cared for and comforted.

Dr. Poole thought the sign was very interesting. He wondered to himself if there needed to be a sign over his sanctuary door that said “Cry Room.” He writes

I have decided that there ought to be a sign in front of every sanctuary that says ‘Cry Room’. After all, big people need a cry room most of all. Big people need a cry room: a place to confess their deepest guilt, ask their toughest questions, and tell their darkest stories. Big people need a cry room: a place where they can find help with all the heavy luggage of unhealed disease, their unreal ambitions, and their unresolved mysteries and unfulfilled hopes. Big people need a cry room; the sanctuary of the church should always and ever be a cry room for big people... a place where the shoulder-stooping, sleep-

robbing, heart-breaking fears, shames, and hurts of life are voiced, not silenced: acknowledged, not denied... a place where the protest of hope is lodged against the evidence for despair...where folks who limp through the narthex bludgeoned by the hard twists, the turns of life can rest up, heal up and hear all over again the gospel of grace and hope.¹

Jesus said it this way, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” If Jesus’ first words about the blessedness of poverty were not enough, he continues with shocking words by saying “Blessed are those who mourn.” The word that Jesus uses for *mourning* is the most drastic terms for crying. It is not simply a “feeling sorry”, a “simple pang of regret”, or “a simple tear from pain for suffering.” It is not a word that even describes a distant feeling of empathy or sympathy toward a stranger or a friend. The word is the word that describes the total sense of mourning the death of one you love. It is the deepest form of mourning that is described by Jesus. It is that total, mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical experience that is experienced by someone who has lost someone to death whom they love deeply. It is the depths of grief, loss and pain.

Therefore, Jesus says that those who are involved in the deepest form of mourning and grief will be comforted. What are the things in life that make us mourn? Let me mention three experiences that bring us grief.

The first is the most obvious: death. There is one thing that we all have in common – we are all going to die. The Bible is clear that it is appointed for all men to die and then the

judgment. The preacher of Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is a time to live and there is a time to die. Death is the common experience for all of us. The death of one we love, or at least the death of those we experience life with, is also a common experience. No matter how much we might try to prepare ourself for the death of one we love, when the reality of death comes, there is a great sense of loss and grief. There is this deep sense of mourning.

The shortest verse of the Bible may be the most insightful into the human experience of Jesus and the depth of the reality of grief. The shortest verse of the Bible is “Jesus wept.” The verse comes as Jesus comes to Bethany to experience the grief surrounding the death of his friend Lazarus. Remember that Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, were a family with which Jesus had a special relationship. He frequented their home; the picture of Jesus and this family is one of familiarity and deep friendship. When Lazarus becomes ill they send for Jesus, but if you remember the story, Jesus does not come immediately. Instead, he waits and tells his disciples that Lazarus has died. Then Jesus makes his way to Bethany. Jesus knows what is going to happen – he is aware that Lazarus is going to live again. Jesus knows that God is going to do something marvelous through him in this grief-stricken moment. So, when Jesus arrives at Bethany and finds Martha and Mary weeping, you might think he would not be affected; he knows that he is going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Jesus knows full well the power of God. Yet, when he sees Martha and Mary weeping and grieving and he comes to the moment of really experiencing Lazarus’ death, Jesus weeps.

The word used for *Jesus wept* is an interesting word. The word *wept* is really more of a sound than an action and has the root for the same word as snort. It is that sound that comes from “deep weeping beyond words.” It is a moment when we could say that Jesus “loses control”, or maybe the better way to say it is that Jesus “completely experiences” his emotions. Although knowing the power of God, Jesus still weeps and mourns deeply over the death of Lazarus.

As Christians, you and I believe in the power of the resurrection. We believe that those who die in the Lord are with the Lord. We stand on the promises

of God’s Word, but just like Jesus we weep. Death, even with the knowledge of God’s power, brings us to the place of deep mourning.

A second reason for mourning is the pain that comes from other losses in life. It might be the loss of health, wealth or relationships. The mourning that comes from the losses in life can be deep and lead to despair. There are many in our congregation who know the loss of health. Life was going as planned and then there was that word . . . cancer. With that word everything has changed. There is uncertainty where there was certainty. There is, in some cases, the pain and the life-changing weeks of treatment. For many, there is a sense of isolation as life goes on without you. There is the loss of health that causes us mourning as the result of facing our own mortality.

There is the loss of wealth. There are many in our current economic climate who know the loss of wealth. Sadly, some have lost homes and other things. But the great mourning in the loss of wealth is the loss of plans and certainty. With the loss of wealth comes fear of the future. “How will we pay for this? What if someone in the family gets sick? What will happen if my company makes this decision?” That loss of things and the uncertainty can bring us mourning.

There is also the loss of relationships. Death is not the only thing that can separate us from those we love. Whether it is putting your child in a car and sending them to college, helping a loved one pack to move across the country, or seeing someone off to the military and to another country, we know the pain of saying goodbye. There are other relationship losses that are not our choice: when a spouse leaves, a child moves away, or a friend or our work is transferred. There is a sense of mourning when relationships are broken.

The third thing that brings us great grief is the pain of regret and shame. Many believe that “Blessed are those who mourn” is about those who mourn their sin. There are some scholars that suggest that this beatitude is about those who spiritually come to the place they regret and are sorry for their sin; when we find that regret for our sin, we find the impetus to experience confession and forgiveness. Even if we do not translate this beatitude in this

way; spiritually, we have to admit that one of the experiences that cause us great grief are those moments in life when we come face to face with something we have done or something we did not do and it has caused us and others pain. The mourning of regret and shame is a very deep moment of mourning.

King David describes his mourning as regret and shame of his adulterous affair in Psalm 51. This Psalm describes the depth of David's despair and shame. David admits his sin and his shame to God and ends with these words "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

My friends, we all have known the pain and the mourning that comes with regret. There was an action that we did or did not do, and we would do anything to be able to go back in time and change our decisions and our choices. We long for a second chance; however, sometimes there are no second chances, there are no ways to make things right. The only thing we can do is ask for God's forgiveness and start to serve God today. The pain comes when we must sometimes live with the consequences of our sin our whole lives.

I am reminded that the Bible teaches us that the wages of sin is death and destruction. The problem with us most of the time is that we don't get paid day to day, week to week, or even month to month for our sin. But the wages of sin is still death and destruction, and as R.G. Lee use to preach, "There is going to be payday... someday." When the payday for our sin comes, there is regret and shame – there is mourning. There is great mourning in our moments of regret and shame.

Jesus tells us "Blessed are those who mourn." Jesus knew that we would mourn; he does not tell us not to mourn. Jesus does not *suggest* that mourning will be a part of life: he mourned the death of Lazarus, he mourned the rejection of friends and disciples, and he mourned the sin of his own people. We *will* mourn, but how will blessing come in our time of mourning?

We must remember that the word for *blessed* indicates that in mourning itself there is a blessing.

There is something that is intrinsic in the mourning process that is a gift of God. What is it about mourning that is blessed?

Dr. Charles Poole suggests three gifts from God that come with mourning. Let me share them with you.

First, he writes that mourning or grief is the inevitable price of love. If we love deeply we will grieve deeply. It is like the old song of Garth Brooks, "I could have missed the pain but I would have missed the dance." The truth is we grieve only that which we truly loved. When we grieve and mourn, it is a sign that something significant has happened in our lives.

We can avoid the pain of the loss of a spouse, but we will have to not have the experience of sharing our lives with the one we love. We can avoid the pain of disappointment that children can sometimes bring, but we will have to miss the joy they bring as well. We can avoid the pain of losing a friend, but we will have to miss the meaning that friends bring to our lives. Mourning is a gift because it is the reminder of a deep love.

Secondly, mourning is a blessing because it is life's lingering echo. What is meant by this is that the memory that brings our pain also brings us thoughts of joy. The same memory that produces tears produces smiles.

Recently when Robin was visiting her father, who is suffering from dementia, they made a comment about Robin's mother dying. The look on my father-in-law's face was something between confusion and sorrow. "She is dead?" he asked. In that moment, he was experiencing the pain of loss all over again. The tragedy, of course, with the loss of memory is that you not only forget the pain you forget the joy as well. But mourning is a blessing because it is life's lingering echo.

Poole's third point is that mourning is hope's best chance. What he means is this: When we experience grief we can become bitter or it can be the moment we turn to Jesus. It can be the very moment when we make new priorities and life's true meaning becomes clear. It can be the moment we

release our lives into the hands of God. When we mourn the loss of one we love to death, or we find our self with the loss of wealth, health or relationships, or we mourn because of sin that yields regret and shame, we are left many times with nowhere else to turn but to God. In that moment then, mourning becomes hopes best chance. It becomes the moment we turn to God.²

Blessed are those who mourn because in mourning itself there are gifts. There is the gift of being reminded of something we loved. There is the memory of joy that has been experienced. There is the opportunity for us to turn to God. That is really Jesus' point. Blessed are those who mourn because they will be comforted. Jesus' promise is that when we turn to him, regardless of our reason for mourning, there is comfort.

In 1956 J.W. Spruce passed away. Mr. Spruce was a deacon at a local church and a man of God. He awoke with a pain in his chest and knew that it was his time. His daughter was by his side and he looked to his daughter and gave this advice. "I can't tell you not to weep. I'd cry too, if it was you who were dying. I know you need to cry. But this is Friday morning. So, whatever you do, don't cry past Tuesday."³

All of us need to cry, but just as there is a time for weeping, there is a time for joy. Just as there is a time for death, there is a time to live. I think that is what Jesus meant. He did not say "Do not weep." He knows we need to weep. He wept himself, but he did say "When you mourn you will be comforted."

It was just a little black sign with white letters. It said "Cry Room." Welcome to the Cry Room. Go ahead and mourn. Mourn the loss of those we loved. Mourn the losses of life like health, wealth and friendships. Mourn our sin that has brought regret and shame. But do not weep forever. There is a shoulder to cry on. It is the shoulder of Jesus himself. This is his promise "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted." ❁

¹Charles Poole, *Don't Cry Past Tuesday* (Greenville, SC: Smith & Helwys Publishing, 1991) 1-2.

²This whole treatment is from Charles Poole's sermon "The Strange Gift of Grief" as found in *Don't Cry Past Tuesday* (Greenville, SC: Smith & Helwys Publishing, 1991) 67-73.

³Poole, 75.

