

Good Mourning  
Matthew 5:1-12

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

In 1994 Hugh Grant starred in what is seemingly an endless line of romantic comedies. This one was titled, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. I confess to you that I did not see the movie. I confess that I do all I can not to see any Hugh Grant movie. I prefer romance movies like – *Lethal Weapon* or *Braveheart* and the one I plan to see soon – *The Book of Eli*.

In *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, the hilarity of a band of friends is interrupted by the untimely death of one of the band – Gareth. During the eulogy his friend read W. H. Auden's poem *Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone* ... suggesting that in mourning we do as the title suggest, <sup>1</sup>

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

*Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,  
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,  
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.*

*He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.*

*The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.<sup>2</sup>*

Americans are lousy mourners. We pity those who mourn. We avoid them, seeing them in the grocery store we avert our gaze and quickly

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<sup>1</sup> Beatitudes for Today

<sup>2</sup> W. H. Auden

move to another aisle. We may dash off a note or even muster up the courage to apply a theological balm of words, something like, "You know he is in a better place." And then we expect them to get on with their life after a couple of weeks. We'll tell them to get better soon and then we'll rush back to life's weddings with the accompanying hilarity.

I much prefer mourners like the ones in the funeral scene in *Zorba the Greek*. Those folks knew how to mourn. They hovered around the dying person's room, wailing and weeping, crouching in corners and leaning against the wall all the while fixing their gaze with laser like focus on the death bed. They are sending the departing off with hymns of lament and rivers of tears – of course they are all paid for their effort. As soon as the person passes they immediately strip the room of all the furnishing right down to the bed sheets. These folks preserve some of the traditions past down from the ancients.

Around Galilee during Jesus' time, mourning was more like Zorba than Grant. They wailed and moaned and they were in no hurry. Mourners would literally tear the clothes off their backs. Right out for all to see, they would scream in agony, scoop dirt from the ground and shake it over the top of their heads. The thought of going to work or trying to "stay busy" to occupy their time and thoughts was never considered. Friends and family would gather and linger with their grief for at least a week with intensity unimaginable to our 21<sup>st</sup> century western minds. These folks pitied those who mourned.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn." Yet, to our sense the ancients seem cursed. We want to put away the veil of mourning and put on our party clothes and return to life sooner rather than later, just like Gareth's friends in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. Christians should not be like that – yes, yes, I know all the right theological explanations. I know that because of Jesus our hope is in the resurrections. I know that and it's true. But the pain of loss is real.

When we muster up the courage to stick with someone in mourning, when we listen to the story and bear the tears, you begin to change, they begin to change because you are there in the midst of the pain and so is the Spirit of the Living God.

I know a mother whose teenage daughter was killed in a freak accident. She was riding her bicycle, she saw the truck coming behind her, she move to the side of the narrow road that circled the lake where her house, the truck passed and she turned back onto the road, not seeing the boat being pulled behind the truck – that night her

heart stopped beating much like her brain had stopped functioning earlier in the day.

Most of the well intentioned folks wanted the mother to “feel better,” but she didn’t want to feel better, she didn’t want to return the “happy time.” Not yet, not now, for to return to the “happy time” would be to forget her daughter. To try to fill that hole in her heart would be futile. She did not want to banish the hurt because she had not stopped loving.

One of the best books on grief and mourning I have ever read is by Yale philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff – Lament for a Son. It was written in the aftermath of the mountain-climbing death of his 24 year old son, Eric. Several years after this horrible loss, Wolterstorff noticed that the wound “is no longer raw; but it has not disappeared. That is as it should be. If he was worth loving he was worth grieving over. Grief is existential testimony to the worth of one loved ... Every lament is a love-song.”<sup>3</sup>

And how strange is that, in the dark throes of grief, people report how palpable was their sense of God’s presence. Wolterstorff, grappling after God, discovered the truer, deeper nature of God. He wrote, “Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God.” Envision if you will the Beatitudes as a ladder, where the poverty of our spirit is never better known than in our grief.

“Blessed are those who mourn ...” Does Jesus mean only our own personal loss? What about – sins, our sins. If we read the journal entries of the spiritual giants, we find women and men who contemplate their sins and shed tears of grief. Therese of Lisieux wept torrents of tears over the slightest sense of separation from Christ.

In the shadow of the cross of Christ, an intense mourning over the gaping hole in the soul, the yawning gap between me and God, is entirely fitting. To those who grieve over their sin, to those who lament their distance from Jesus, our Lord says, “Blessed are those who mourn...” for it was to these sinner he came to bring restoration and comfort.

Wolterstorff shares another probing reflection: he believes that, after the loss of his son, he would for the rest of his life look at the world through tears; seeing things that dry-eyes could not see. Dry-eyed we

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may look right past the loneliness, the ache that the next person harbors. Dry-eyed, we may flit off to a party, forgetting that wars are raging on this planet; that children are dying because of lack of food or medicine. Dry-eyed, we forget the gross unfairness of some of the world's systems: where evil seems to succeed, while the holy, the humble, those who look like the Beatitudes, suffer. Listen to what Wolterstorff saw through tears:

When you and I are left to our own devices, it's the smiling, successful ones of the world that we cheer ... We turn away from the crying ones of the world. Our photographers tell us to smile. Blessed are those who mourn. What can it mean?

Jesus said, "for they shall be comforted." What a miraculous antidote in that divine reply. We long for comfort. We know something of comfort for at some point in our lives we have either given it or received it. The same Greek verb used for comfort is derived from the same root as the *Comforter*, what we name as the Holy Spirit – the one called to be along side us. The same one Jesus promises to his disciples on the night before his crucifixion (Jn 16:7). Jesus knew they would mourn his death and he did not want them to be paralyzed in their grief, their work in the world was too important for that. He knew that even after the reality of the resurrection they would live with the nagging sense of his absence, that they would be sensitized to sin, pain, and suffering of the world. So he promised the Comforter.

Those who mourn will be comforted and at the end of the day our comforter is the Holy Spirit. But what exactly does the Spirit deliver? Augustine's answer moves me: the gift of the Holy Spirit is nothing other than the Holy Spirit. God loves and gives us not this or that, but something of immeasurably wonderful value: the Spirit's own self. The Psalmist praying in agony, with nothing left to hang on to, prays to God in a way that no doubt moves the Spirit to smile;

Whom have I in heaven but thee?

And there is noting upon the earth that I desire besides thee.  
My flesh and heart may fail,

But God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.  
For lo, those who are far from thee shall perish; ...  
But for me it is good to be near God;

I have made the Lord God my refuge. Ps. 73:25-28

In a way the comfort Jesus offers is his-self, as he invites those who mourn to follow him, to be near him. The Spirit's comfort is like no other. Friends and family may embrace us; they may stay and grieve through the night with us; saying prayers and reading Psalms. Folks may bring casseroles and send flowers and cards. But the Spirit, who rest mightily upon them all and bless their deeds, can go where not even the closest friend or relative can go. The Spirit delves into the unseen depths of the soul, and knows us better than we know ourselves; feeling our suffering even before we are aware of it. The Spirit is God, the Spirit is love, and the Spirit comforts us not with anything, but with the Spirit.

Mourning sees the injustice of the world and acts. Mourning sees hunger, and acts. Mourning sees, homelessness, and acts. Mourning sees children dying senselessly and acts. And in the acting, comfort begins to emerge and it is a comfort we can embrace – the wound is healing; the scare will remain, but the flesh will not fester – in their acts of grace, those who mourn are comforted.

I invite you to be good mourners. Yesterday a group of mourners went to a home and built a ramp so that a wheel chair bound man could enjoy a greater measure of freedom. This past Thursday night Bennie Foss took the time to learn what she could do to ease the pain and plight of homeless families, to provide shelter and assistant in getting back into a home of their own. This week a group of ladies will come together to pray and make quilts; quilts that will be given so that those who are suffering will know that they are not alone, that we suffer with them and pray for them. And in all of these actions, in the plywood and nails, the needles and quilt patches, there in the midst is the Spirit who precedes us and was waiting for us, saying to us; be a blessing to those who mourn; be my blessing to those who mourn, show them a measure of my comfort.

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Amen.*