



The Grace of Lament

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 5:2-5

February 28, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

There is so much that is odd about this second Beatitude. Jesus says, that someday, not today, but someday those whose hearts are broken, they will find comfort. And because that is true, they are blessed now in the midst of the brokenness. Does that make sense?

To his followers, Jesus' words had to sound like a note played in the wrong key. Grieving is a good thing? This was not the view held by the worldly wisdom of his day. Greek philosophers of various schools—Cynics, Stoics, even Epicureans—they, for differing reasons, believed that grieving was weak or unnecessary and certainly not good. And when you are grieving, it certainly doesn't seem to be blessed.

The world has done its share of grieving this year. About as many Americans have died of COVID in this single year as died in the four years of the Civil War. The grieving seems unending.

And even now, after 11 months of talking to you from this empty sanctuary, I still see you here. I never come in here without seeing you. Some of you sitting up there in the balcony. Others, I see you down here in the first few pews. Or those of you who just barely get in the room and sit there in the back row. It helps that almost all of you sit in the same place every week. I can imagine you there. And those of you who come not to this room, but Friendship Hall on Sunday afternoons for the Gathering, I can see you, too. And those of you who worship at Antioch.

What I know is that so many of you have carried your grief to church because there was a day when there was someone who came with you, or someone you met here, who is no longer here. And it breaks your heart and there is nothing that seems blessed about that. I know the courage it takes to walk the day with a broken heart. And I also know from some of

you that in time, often a long time, the heartbreak becomes kinder, gentler. And in time, often a long time, there is the experience that Jesus names: those who mourn will be comforted—in time.

But it's the verb tenses that make the Beatitudes so challenging. Jesus doesn't say that when your heart is broken, hold on, because better days are coming and someday you will know the blessing of comfort. The Beatitudes do not give us exhortations to 'hang in there, the promised day is coming.' While the comfort for the broken-hearted remains future tense, the blessing of which Jesus speaks is present tense. It is when your heart is broken that you know the blessing of which Jesus speaks.

That is where he turns the world upside-down. Do you think he's right about that? That there is something holy and blessed about knowing a broken heart? How is that the case?

There is something I say at most memorial services, maybe not all, but at most. I point out, during the times when it is possible to gather, that while it may appear that we gather because death has come, that's not quite right. When we gather for a service bearing witness to the resurrection, it is not death that brings us to the service. It's not death that draws us, but love. For if we did not love, death would have no effect on us. Apart from love, there is no reason to grieve. Mourning is the last act of love.

If I understand the text, this is the wisdom in Jesus' Beatitude. It is a blessing to love. If you love, you make your heart vulnerable because the world can treat love harshly. And the only way to avoid such grief is to make sure you don't love at all. But those who love passionately, generously, they know what a blessed life is like.

I think that is true. But I think there is more to this teaching of Jesus.

If I understand the text, he is not simply speaking of our individual grief, but the communal grief—the lament we have for the world. The truth is, all of us as individuals and all of us as communities, we fall short of God's dreams for us. And when you know that, when you can remember how God wants us to be with one another and we see the way we are, it breaks your heart.

When we lived in Florida, more summers than not, Carol and I would pack our then preschool- or elementary-aged children into our mini-van and we would drive eight hours to Montreat, NC, where we would spend a week vacationing in the mountains. We had great times there.

But our kids found the all-day car ride to be an injustice, almost unbearable. Before we had gotten 15 minutes down the road, one of them was already asking, "Are we there yet?" You have had that car ride. It drove me crazy. "Not yet, just 7 hours and 45 minutes to go." Ten minutes later, "Are we there yet?" "No, not yet." We were half-way there, middle of nowhere South Carolina. "Are we there yet?" "Yep. Here we are." To which they said, "*This is it?*"

If there is one thing that we as people of faith know, it is that we are not there yet. Oh, there are many things about life that are hard to figure out. Yet, it's not the things that are hard, but rather the things our faith teaches us that we know that provide the most challenge.

This past summer, people from all kinds of communities poured into the street and chanted, "Black Lives Matter." It was a picture of what this Beatitude looks like. Oh, we can pick it apart; it's easy. Were all the supposed leaders pure? No. Was every instance deemed 'racist' obvious? Probably not.

But at least to me, and you may see this differently, the most modest response should be to acknowledge that after generations of communities of color being pushed down and lagging behind on every metric, we

should agree that we are not home yet. And it should break our hearts—not leave us unaffected.

But is knowing that things are not as God intends them to be, is knowing that blessed?

I was helped with this by Dr. Alan Cole. I met him when I was on the board of Austin Seminary, as he was on the faculty at that time. He says that there is a difference between grieving and mourning. Grief, he says, is what happens to you. You know what I mean. It is the rush of tears that creeps up on you in the middle of anything. The sorrow and sadness that envelops you in the midst of ordinary living because a love of your heart is taken away. It's the catch in the throat of silly things—a song, a car driving down the street, a particular meal. That's grief. Mourning, says Dr. Cole, is the hard work we do to face and walk through our grief. Mourning is the intentional work to address what is broken in us and in the world.

In that sense, I think what Jesus says is, if we know we are not home, if we know that things are broken around us, and our response is, "Well, that's just the way of the world," there is nothing blessed about that.

But if you know things are broken and we commit ourselves to participating in making right what we can make right, it's holy. It's blessed.

You know this. Think about how you have been blessed in this way. So many of our means of serving are compromised these days, but in days gone by and in days to come, you will be there—tutoring children who need not just to learn to read but need you in their lives. You will travel to distant places to walk with Christians in other lands who face unbelievable challenges. You will provide food for the hungry. And you will partner with people of color to lift up those who for so long have been pushed down.

You have done that before and do so now and will do so again. It is the work of mourning and it is blessed. It is holy. Are we there yet? Not by a long shot, but we are on the way, thanks be to God.