



Blessed Are Those Who Mourn

TEXT
Matthew 5:1-12

November 13, 2016 — 8:00, 9:30 a.m. — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

God's love sends you into a world that is beautiful, but broken.¹ It has been an emotional week. The election results caught the pollsters by surprise. In protests in cities across the country, people express their distress and fear as the election has raised questions about what kind of nation we are. The election results not only revealed who our next president will be, but it also revealed that we are a nation deeply and evenly divided. Of the almost 121 million people who voted on Tuesday, the popular vote was only 574,000 apart. If that division were over minor things, that would be one thing. But the division reveals anger, hostility, a sense by many that the other side does not see them, does not welcome them, does not include them in a dream for America. There is anger: We don't seem to like each other. It will not surprise you that I think these are more than political matters; they are civic matters, they are spiritual matters.

I want to offer just some thought today on how these are spiritual matters. These are complex times, and I think it is good for our church, good for our faith and good for our nation to consider these days from a faith perspective.

If you find help in these words, I am grateful. If you see things differently, I hope you take no offense because no offense is intended. If you agree with me, take no comfort; we could both be wrong. I will be honest with you.

From the days of Pentecost, God decided the world needed the church — I think, in part, so that there might be a people who would love the world even when it is broken. The brokenness is everywhere. Brokenness is witnessed in human suffering. For the longest time, I thought that suffering was an aberration to normal life. A normal human life should be a life of comfort. I no longer see it that way. I have come to understand that suffering is not an aberration. All people suffer. All people grieve. All people know what it is to cry through the night and to have your dreams dashed and your heart broken. It is a universal spiritual struggle.

Not only have I come to believe suffering is universal and no aberration, but for Christians, suffering may be a calling. There is something essentially Christian in having a broken heart.

Months ago I decided that today we would reflect on the beatitude "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be

comforted." I think it is a faithful word for us today.

You see, the Beatitudes are wisdom for the long haul. Jesus says we are blessed *now* because of what *will be*. Those who mourn today are blessed because comfort will come someday.

There is something essentially Christian in having a broken heart. This claim requires some explanation because every one of us in this room knows all too well what it is to have your heart broken, to be held captive by grief, to know the disorienting, hollowing out, painful realities of grief. And it does not feel like a blessing at all.

So what does Jesus mean?

When we lived in Florida, more summers than not, Carol and I would pack our preschool or early elementary-aged children into our minivan, and we would drive eight hours to Montreat, North Carolina, 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 seven hours and 45 minutes to go."

Ten minutes later: “Are we there yet?”

“No, not yet.” We were half-way there, in the middle of nowhere South Carolina.

“Are we there yet?”

“Yep, here we are,” to which they said, “This is it?”

If I understand the text, the Beatitudes teach that those who are truly blessed are those who look at the world as it is and know we are not there yet. The world is not the way it should be. The world is broken. People are suffering. We do not treat our neighbor as God intends us to treat our neighbor.

When we know the way the world is supposed to be, and we see the way the world is, well, it breaks your heart. Blessed are they who mourn, those who know we are not home yet.

Read it a different way: Because the world is broken, we are not supposed to be comforted now. I think that’s true. If we are followers of Jesus Christ, we should not be a comfortable people. People who trust in God’s coming kingdom, people who yearn for justice, people who yearn for compassion, people who believe in human flourishing . . . the world is not as it should be, and it breaks our hearts. We mourn.

So as followers of Jesus, we are to pay attention to those who suffer. That is a blessed life. It is blessed, but not easy.

I remember getting a note from someone. It was after a hard week. I don’t remember which one. Maybe it was the week of the shooting in Charleston . . . or San Bernadino . . . or Paris. We came bringing with us the hurt of the week. I talked about the situation. My friend said, “Tom,

why do you have to talk about things like this in church? When I come to church I just want peace. I want to leave those things behind. I want some sanctuary.”

I get that. Sometimes we need that. I would just like to push all of that away. But there are two things about that. First, it is a sign of our privilege when we can barricade ourselves from the deepest suffering of the world. Those caught in the brokenness don’t have that luxury.

But more importantly, when we do separate ourselves from the suffering of the world, we are also separating ourselves from God — because God is going to be with those who suffer. From a Nazi prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.”²²

It is Christian to have a broken heart when that brokenness results from paying attention to people who suffer. It matters. The Beatitudes are words of wisdom for the long haul. And the struggle for justice, the struggle for healing, the struggle to human flourishing is the long haul. To live toward God’s promised day is not something that is fully realized today. But the first step toward that ultimate promise may be to see people in light of what they suffer.

We have seen the division in our country — not only in the election, but in the response to the election. There have not only been protests, but there are a growing number of hateful incidents. Racial taunts have increased, even among schoolchildren. Muslims have reported having folks yell at them,

“Go home, you don’t belong here!” There was a white man beaten by black men while onlookers shouted, “You voted for Trump.” We are not just divided; we are angry with one another.

In my enote to you on Friday, I said, “While I don’t know how you voted, I am confident that some of us are relieved with the election outcome and some of us are grieved; but we are the church together. We are the nation together as well.”

I do not know how history will interpret this election, but the immediate analysis is that millions in this country are being left behind by our economy. As the country has come back from the economic downturn in 2008, there are many who have been passed by. Politicians of both parties have viewed them as collateral damage to progress, and they are struggling to find work that will pay enough to feed their families. They have felt their suffering was ignored by our political leadership, and they voted their pain.

Inasmuch as the president-elect paid attention to the suffering of Americans, particularly the suffering that others failed to see, that’s a good thing. But during the campaign, Mr. Trump paid attention to the suffering of some at the expense of others. He has changed his tone a bit this week. He has said he wants to be president of all Americans. I support him in that. To do so, he will have to change his rhetoric — because his speech has left many in our nation afraid, belittled and legitimately asking if there is room for them in America.

As a person of faith, it makes me very concerned when anyone

is viewed with suspicion because of their faith.

I have a wife, and I have a daughter, and it is not unpatriotic to expect our president will view them with respect and not with a “boys will be boys” attitude. In this culture, where sexual assault is a serious concern, men must be men.

As people of faith, we must pay attention to those who are afraid, those who are anxious, those who suffer. For this is not how God wants people to live. We are not home yet.

We are a nation where many have felt forgotten in the economy. God hears their cry. But we should not pit one population over against another, as if some of us are the real America. Let us insist on a nation whose ethic is that we forget no one. And until that day comes, let it break our hearts.

In my enote on Friday, I mentioned how grateful I am to live in a country where power transitions peacefully. There may be protest, but there is no military violence.

On March 4, 1801, power passed from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson. It was not a happy thing for everyone. Jefferson had been Adams’ vice president. But Jefferson believed Adams’ policies were too sympathetic with monarchy. So Jefferson ran against Adams in the election of 1800, and Jefferson defeated Adams.

The campaign had been so bitter that these former friends — Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, and Adams, the voice of independence — ceased speaking to one another. For over a decade, they refused to speak to one another.

But on January 1, 1812, at the urging of Dr. Benjamin Rush, Adams broke the silence. He rose above his pain and wrote a letter to Jefferson. This renewed a relationship, and over the next 14 years, they wrote 158 letters to one another. These once bitter enemies reconciled and corresponded until their death. Adams’ last words were of Jefferson: “Jefferson survives.” He could not have known that five hours earlier, the very same day, Jefferson, too, had died. It was July 4, 1826 — 50 years to the day after together they signed the Declaration of Independence.³

We need reconciliation in this nation. Reconciliation is Christian work. We are a people divided. It is not as it should be.

Let us pay attention to those who suffer. Let us listen to them. Perhaps in knowing the pain, we can find our way to a better day. Alice Walker has written, “In the wake of the election, we can turn on others or we can turn toward others.”⁴

So I want to invite you to consider something. Have a conversation across the aisle. Find someone who voted for the candidate that you did not vote for; it’s probably best if it is not someone in your family. But talk with him or her. This is not the time to try to convince or attack another because you see the world differently. That time has passed; it will come again. But now is the time to embrace the wisdom of St. Francis, who prayed,

“O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.”

This is not the time to continue the debate. This is the time to listen. Find someone who voted differently than you did and ask them to tell you why. Ask them to tell you of the America they dream of. Seek to understand.

It is my belief that what may look like hatred on the outside is pain on the inside. Maybe as much as ever, God has placed the church in this nation to be a safe place to listen to the pain, to understand those who suffer and to mourn with them.

We are not home yet ... to know that breaks your heart. It is also blessed, for those who mourn will be comforted.

¹This sermon series offers reflection on the benediction spoken at Village. “God’s love welcomes us to this time of worship. But now that same holy love sends us out into God’s beloved world that is beautiful, but broken.”

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*

³This story can be found on multiple websites. It is also recorded in detail in David McCullough’s *John Adams* (2001).

⁴Alicewalkersgarden.com, November 9, 2016

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.