

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted

Message #4 in the series, "Blessed (for Chaos)"

Matthew 5:4

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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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 receive 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 for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3-10)*

Thank you, Pastor David, for inviting the Hurleys and me here to St. Paul's this morning. We're really glad to be with you.

Statistics say that in any given church service, it's likely that 50% of the people are grieving a loss of some kind. But it's an odd thing, isn't it? Scripture tells us that Jesus wept, Job wept, David wept, and Jeremiah wept. But in church, where these tear-soaked scriptures are provided to shape our souls and form our behavior, we push Kleenex into the hands of people who cry. We murmur reassurances that it's going to be all right. By our behavior, we unintentionally tell each other that this is something to clean up, to get over. Why are Christians, of all people, so uneasy in the presence of sorrow, so unpracticed in the language of lament?

Over a quarter-century ago, my husband and I lost our eight-year-old daughter. In the years following the publication of a book I wrote about her life and death, I met lots of grieving parents, whose first question to me was always, "Will it ever get better?"

I would usually answer, "It takes time." I could never bear to tell them just how *much* time. Three years ago, I was asked the question again. This time, now 24 years into my grief, I had to ask myself, *Has it gotten better? And if so, how?* My answer came in the form of a second book—*Grief Is a Dancer*. The title began to form in me after I saw the dance "Two Halves Make a W(hole)" performed by the Hurleys. The choreography had drawn out and embodied my sorrow so pitch-perfectly that I began to view grief not just as an endless hemorrhage, or a malady to be healed from, but as a bright, physical, intuitive, loving being, independent of myself, sent to partner with me in my sorrow.

Poet Andrea Gibson writes, "A difficult life is not less worth living than a gentle one. Joy is simply easier to carry than sorrow. And your heart could lift a city from how long you've spent holding what's been nearly impossible to hold. This world needs those who know how to do that. Those who could find a tunnel that has no light at the end of it and hold it up like a telescope, to know the darkness also contains truth that could bring the light to its knees. Grief astronomer, adjust the lens. Look close. Tell us what you see."

That dance was wrenching for me the first time I saw it, and every time after that. Maybe it was for you, too. Maybe you even came today, or tuned into this service, to try to feel "better" about your life, and now, here you are, all stirred up again. But what if these hard emotions are God's gift to you? What if God is inviting you to lean *into* your pain, rather than stiffen and resist it?

The soundtrack you just heard ends with a peculiar statement. Right at the end, if you were listening carefully, the songwriter says, "I think that was wonderful." *What's* wonderful? Losing everyone and everything that we're attached to in this life does *not* feel *wonderful*. Losses are devastating.

Just before Christmas, nine years ago, there was a new game show on NBC, hosted by Howie Mandel. It was called, *Take It All*, based on that white elephant game many of us have played where, when it's your turn, you either pick a gift from the pile of wrapped gifts, or you steal someone else's gift if you happen to like theirs better. Only, this version was the white elephant game on *steroids*.

The prizes were quirky and lavish: there were expensive sets of jewelry, a year's supply of hot dogs, cruises for 20 people, jet packs, mechanical bulls, hovercraft, and luxury cars. There were seven straight episodes, and on night five, a young woman in a pink sweater made it to the final round, amassing nearly \$250,000 in cash and prizes. She was joined by a guy about her age, who also had won nearly the same amount.

All that remained for them to do to keep their winnings, was to each write down on a little board, "KEEP MINE." But of course, this is TV, and it's not entertaining unless they raise the stakes. So, the rules were that you could also write down, "TAKE IT ALL."

If both contestants said, "TAKE IT ALL," no one would get anything. But if just one said, "TAKE IT ALL," and the other said, "KEEP MINE," the one who said "TAKE IT ALL" would get *everything*, and the one who said, "KEEP MINE," would get nothing.

Before writing down their answers, they were told to face off, to lie if need be—do whatever they could to make off with the biggest prize. The young woman in the pink sweater said that she'd lost a sister and wanted to donate part of her winnings to a foundation related to her sister's illness. Then she looked the young man straight in the eye: "I was raised with two sisters. I *know* how to share."

Then it was the young man's turn. He also told a sad story about his grandmother in a wheelchair, and how he wanted to help her financially. And that he, too, knew how to share.

They were both convincing enough. When the time came for them to write down their final answer, the woman lifted her board, and on it she had written, "KEEP MINE."

And with that, the young man's eyes lit up, and a Cheshire grin began to spread from ear to ear. On his board was, "TAKE IT ALL."

It was devastating to watch. As it turned out, the young man had made up the story about his grandmother, and was rewarded with \$500,000. And the woman in the pink sweater, who was telling the truth, went home with nothing.

How did I know this for sure? Because she told us herself. The young woman in the pink sweater was our daughter.

There are plenty of biblical stories that mirror this same thing. King David, who had all the wives and concubines he could possibly want, took for himself the only wife of one of the soldiers in his army. And if ever anyone lost it all, it was certainly Job. But I'd like to focus on another biblical figure this morning, and that's Joseph, the one with the technicolor dream coat.

Remember he got a little cocky about being his father's favorite? Remember he had a prophetic dream that one day his eleven brothers would bow down to him? And he actually *told* them that?

One day, his brothers couldn't stand it anymore. They looked at him wearing that prized coat and burned against their father for his favoritism. They raged against Joseph himself, the apple of their father's eye. And in the heat of jealousy, they raised their boards in unison: "TAKE IT ALL." And Joseph, who had already lost his mother, didn't even have a chance to "KEEP MINE."

Many of us also have a version of this story, where things and people of great worth to us, and to which we are deeply attached, are suddenly taken away. But this morning's message isn't about greed or retribution. It's about how you respond when what you had in your hands . . . is gone.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." The surface interpretation of that is that sorrow will be wiped away. No more tears in heaven, right? And because it was such a short distance in the mouth of Jesus between when he said "mourn" to when he said "comforted," we imagine we should be out of pain fairly quickly. After all, a healing, loving God wouldn't want us to suffer too long, right?

But just ask someone who's experienced tremendous loss. They might have a different interpretation.

After having endured being abandoned, enslaved, seduced and imprisoned, Joseph was able to gain release by interpreting the Pharaoh's dream about the coming seven years of abundance, followed by seven years of famine. For doing that, he was promoted to Governor of Egypt. And given a wife. And they had a son. And here's the verse that may seem fairly insignificant, but it teaches us something important:

Joseph named his firstborn, Manasseh, and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household. (Genesis 41:51)

Joseph thought he was done with grief. Isn't this what we all want? It's not healthy to keep looking back and dwelling on the pain, right? In fact, let's not be in pain at all. Let's sing upbeat songs about our faith, remind each other of the promises of heaven when conversation gets too sad. And while we're at it, binge-watch a good series on Netflix with a giant bowl of popcorn. Or sell the house where it happened. Make a fresh start. Do whatever we can to get ahead of grief, so that it can't catch us and bring us down.

Sometimes pain is so raw that you *have* to numb yourself for a while. Certainly, all of us have needed refreshing, uplifting diversions from the kinds of things we've been going through with this pandemic. Even for Joseph, I'm sure naming his son was a joyous diversion, and a great act of faith.

But grief was not finished with him.

Most of you know the rest of the story. Joseph is now in a position of great power, and the family he hasn't seen in 20 years is desperate for food. Ten of his brothers travel to Egypt in hopes of buying grain to survive.

They show up at the palace, and Joseph recognizes them, but they don't recognize him. Think about it: he had now aged from a teenage boy into a 37-year-old man. They thought he was dead. Who would've guessed that this high-level governor, decked in royal attire, smooth-shaven and speaking the language of the Egyptians, could be the wiry kid they threw into a pit and sold off to a traveling caravan?

Joseph speaks through an interpreter, not letting on that he can understand them. When he grills them about their family and accuses them of being spies, he hears them frantically talking about how all this distress has come upon them because of what they did to their younger brother. And just like that, the painful memories awaken. The scriptures say, *He turned away from them and began to weep.* (Gen. 42:24) Not only is Joseph starting to realize that maybe he *hadn't* forgotten all his troubles and his father's household, but his brothers are starting to mourn their collective wrongdoing.

The brother that Joseph is most desperate to see, of course, is his younger brother Benjamin, who is not with them. Their grieving father Jacob, unable to bear the thought of losing yet another of his deceased wife Rachel's two sons, had refused to let him go. But Joseph makes them go back to get him. Father Jacob is not happy

about this. But they don't have a choice. The whole family will starve to death if they don't get the grain.

So, the brothers take Benjamin and bring him to stand before Joseph. And here's where grief pulls back the curtain of loss even further. Seeing his beloved little brother, it all wells up in him so fast that the Bible says, *He hurried out and looked for a place to weep.* **(Genesis 43:30)**

These weren't gentle tears of nostalgia. This was the remembrance of all that he knew as *home*. Of everything he tried to forget, but that he remembered as loving, safe, and secure. Not even the second most powerful position in the land, or 20 years' time, could make up for his lost family.

After he hurried out to wail privately, he washed his face and came back out. And he still doesn't tell them who he is. What follows is a lot of artful scheming and framing by Joseph. He feeds them, makes them travel back home again, slips his silver cup into the grain sack of the young Benjamin, and frame him for stealing. But when Benjamin is caught, and they're all brought back to the palace again, his brother Judah steps up and pleads with Joseph to take *him* captive instead of Benjamin:

If the boy is not with us when I go back to my father, and if my father, whose life is so closely bound up with this boy's life, sees that the boy isn't there, he will die. **(Genesis 44:30)**

Then Judah socks him even harder in the gut: *If you do this, your servants will bring the gray head of our father down to the grave in sorrow.*

The tremors of emotion that Joseph had experienced so far were low on the Richter scale compared to the magnitude he feels now:

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So, there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's house heard about it.
(Genesis 45:1-2)

Can you imagine being one of the brothers right then, and hearing the kind of wailing that drives a stake through your heart and cracks open the ground you're standing on? They were already shaking in their boots because of what they did to their supposedly-dead brother. And now this royal governor, whose favor they are desperately trying to win, who is stunned at the possibility that his elderly father may still be alive, who is pierced to the marrow by learning how deeply his father has grieved for him over the last two decades, can no longer contain himself. He cries out, *I am Joseph! Is my father still living?*

His brothers were not able to answer him, because they were *terrified at his presence*.

It is not easy to be around grieving people.

Much to their shock, Joseph forgives them and goes so far as to tell them God actually *meant* this to happen, that it was God's doing in the first place, not theirs.

Joseph's grief was now released, and flowing freely. He wraps his arms tightly around his beloved brother Benjamin, and they weep. He kisses all his brothers and weeps over them as well. And when they finally bring back their father Jacob, Joseph throws his arms around him in the most heart-wrenching reunion and weeps.

Grief is rigorous work.

Blessed are those who mourn... *for by that heavy work of mourning, for by the rigor of facing complicated layers of loss, they will be comforted.*

The people we love, and have had to say final goodbyes to, continue to populate our memory in pockets, shadows, flashbacks, and floods for the rest of our lives. They are part of its essence and fabric; we wouldn't ever want them to stop being that.

I titled my book, *Grief Is a Dancer*, because I believe grief is the energy of love, the Holy Spirit partnering with us in our sorrow. Grief is a dancer who shows up at the most devastatingly inconvenient time. At first, you think it's a terrible partner, and you blame it for all the turbulence.

But in time, you discover that grief is your finest friend, and was actually working to stabilize you in your trauma.

Wherever you are today, whether you're experiencing fresh loss, or grief is inviting you to examine something that happened a long time ago, or maybe you need right now to rest from all the rigor, may our God, who loves us to the depths, who reaches out to partner with us in our fiercest trials, in our most profound loneliness and confusion, and in our most broken places, be with you. Amen.