

Summer in the Beatitudes: “Good Grief? Good Grief!”

Psalms 121

¹ *I lift up my eyes to the hills –
from where will my help come?*
² *My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*
³ *He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.*
⁴ *He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*
⁵ *The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.*
⁶ *The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.*
⁷ *The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.*
⁸ *The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.*

Matthew 5:4

⁴ *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”*

The Message:

⁴ *“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.”*

Harry Crews is a novelist who now teaches at the University of Florida. Some years ago, he wrote a book about his own growing up years on a farm way out in the boondocks of that state. I especially like a reflection in the book about the times when the Sears and Roebuck catalog would arrive and all the kids would gather around it in goggle-eyed amazement.

He said that everybody he knew was nothing like those perfect people who modeled the clothing and the underwear in the catalog. “Everybody I knew,” he wrote in his book, “had something missing – a finger cut-off, a toe split, an ear half-chewed away, an eye clouded with blindness from a glancing fence staple. And if they didn’t have something missing, they were carrying scars from barbed wire stretched so tight it broke, or knives or fishhooks. But the people in the catalogue had no such hurts. They were not only whole, had all their arms and legs and toes and eyes on their unscarred bodies, but they were also beautiful. Their legs were straight and their heads were never bald and on their faces were looks of happiness, even joy, looks that I never saw much of in the faces around me.”

But then he made this very perceptive observation. He said, “Young as I was, though, I had known for a long time that it was all a lie. I knew that under those fancy clothes there had to be scars, there had to be swellings or boils of one kind or another because there was no other way to live in this world.

“And more than that,” he continued, “at some previous unremembered moment, I had decided that all the people in that catalog were related, not necessarily blood kin, but knew one another. And because they knew one another, there had to be hard feelings, and trouble between them off and on, and violence, and hate between them as well as love. And it was out of this knowledge that I first began to make up stories about the people I found in the book.”

Harry Crews is right, isn't he? Even those who look real good on the surface usually have a place where they're not a whole lot different from all the rest of us. We might not see that place very often, they might keep it covered up and hidden most of the time, but it's there in them as well as in all the rest of us.

In other words, no matter how we look on the surface, we're not beautiful people – we've all been half-chewed by life. We all know sorrow and grief and need the comfort and strength of God.

I remember when Laurie and I arrived at First Church fifteen years ago. We met a ton of people. It took us the longest time to put names and faces and histories together. But, really, we already knew you. We knew from the very beginning was that each and every one of you had personally experienced the brokenness of this world. Maybe it's been a failed marriage, or problems with children. Maybe it's been financial struggles or sorrow over the death of a loved one. Maybe it's been a battle with temptation, with forgiveness, or anger with God. If we're honest, most of us know well the pain that saturates our world. The bottom line is that none of us is completely whole, so we need the healing and transforming power of the spirit of God.

The good news is that Jesus says that those who sorrow deeply are close, very close, to the heart of God. This is, of course, counter-intuitive. We look on mourning, on grief, as a thing to be pitied and avoided. In contrast, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn!” When the brilliant bible-scholar William Barclay translated the beatitudes, he began each sentence not with “blessed,” but with “O the bliss!” That puts this teaching in yet greater relief, and Jesus would have approved of the strong language.

*Jesus spoke Aramaic, but Matthew was writing for a wide audience, the entire world at the time, and so he interprets Jesus' words through the Greek language. And Matthew translates Jesus' Aramaic word for “mourning” into the strongest possible Greek equivalent. The word he uses for “sorrow” or “mourning” is *pantheo*. The image is of an almost paralyzing, life-numbing form*

of grief. *Pantheo* was the word used for grieving deeply, or wailing, as when someone we love dies.

When Jesus lived, mourning wasn't something to be rushed by urging people to get on with their lives or by hoping they would "feel better." Mourners would literally tear the clothes off their own backs. Right out in the open, mourners would scream out in agony, scoop up dirt in their hands and shake it onto the tops of their heads. No one tried to "go to work" or "stay busy" or "get over it." Friends gathered and lingered over their grief for at least a week in this intense fashion.^[1] Those who mourned were not regarded as blissful or blessed. Those who mourned were pitied by those who saw their pain.

Just like the ancient Galileans, you and I do not believe that mourning is a way to happiness or blessing. We have no desire to experience painful loss. The late J. B. Phillips said that if we humans were to write this beatitude to reflect life as we see it, we would say, "Blessed are the hard-boiled: for they never let life hurt them." And that, perhaps, is the beatitude a good many people live by: Blessed are you if you're never hurt. Most of us have been taught to keep a tough exterior and to be careful lest we be unnecessarily open to emotional pain.^[2] Still, whether we bear our grief publically or bear it stoically, all of us have known grief. All of us have known the world's pain. We don't see it as a blessing. Why in the world, then, would Jesus declare that we are blessed, exceptionally fortunate, when we mourn?

Pantheo has a second meaning, however, which is just as strong. This is the Greek word that describes sorrow over our sins. I earnestly wonder whether you have experienced that? A very few of you may know in the early days of our country, as Methodists and Baptists spread across the new country like a powerful yeast transforming rough dough into good bread, that there was a very interesting practice. You'd find it particularly when there were revival meetings, but often-times also during regular Sunday meetings. It was what was called the "mourner's bench." It was a little bench or pew that sat in front of the pulpit, to which penitent sinners went and kneeled to pray for the forgiveness of their sins and salvation by faith in Christ. This is the place where people came who were at the end of their rope – as Jennie confessed to you she was last week. And if she, or any of you, came and prayed in front of the pulpit, I'd know you were at the end of your rope! This bench or seat was placed front and center for those who mourned over the evil and failings of their lives, those who knew they had no other place to turn than God. In penitence and mourning they came seeking, and receiving, forgiveness of their sins.

I wonder if we maintained a "mourner's bench" in front of our pulpits today, whether I would have the courage to use it. God knows: I am a half-chewed person just as are all of you. I think often and long and with great sorrow over the

sin in my life: as Paul says, both the things I have done and those I've left undone. I do not regret my mourning because I know it makes me more vulnerable and far more able to love. I would be far less of a human being, and much less of a spiritual being, were it not for the things I mourn and grieve.

Even so, I know a "mourner's bench" would be an unpopular device and no doubt that's why it's fallen completely off the map. But then I think of the number of people who kneel at this communion rail after receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion. And I know they kneel and pray because they are inwardly grieving. They mourn the pain and brokenness of their days. They grieve over the wrong others have done to them and the wrong they have done to others. They mourn those they love who are no longer near. And in their pain and vulnerability Jesus says they are blessed. Blessed!

So here's the thing Jesus grasped which often escapes us. When we're at that point of utter vulnerability in our lives, God is so very near to us. Whether it's mourning over our sins, or our crazy grief when we've lost that which is most dear to us, that's when we break through the shallowness and superficiality of our lives – and God is very close. Jesus encourages us to love with real openness and honesty, but such love also brings great vulnerability. The life that risks love to the point of real vulnerability is loving as God intended from the beginning. The heart that grieves over its sin is a heart willing to risk the vulnerability of reconciliation with God and others. And when we learn to live and love to the point of great vulnerability, even to the point of risking painful loss, we're close to experiencing the blessing of life at its fullest.

One of the great preachers I've had the blessing of hearing was Dr. John Claypool. Claypool grew up as a Southern Baptist and spent the early part of his ministry as a southern Baptist preacher. But he says he got disillusioned and weary of the pressure he felt to do any and everything to get more converts, more baptisms, to have the biggest church. He said that was all he and his colleagues talked about, as if they were in some type of contest to see who would win. So Claypool became an Episcopalian.

But John was a preacher who spoke sensitively from the heart. I mention John Claypool because one of the transforming experiences of his life was the death of his only daughter, Laura Lue, to leukemia. It was devastating for him. Laura Lue was only ten. Claypool describes his pain saying, "Right after she died I was so filled with sadness. I went down one night to my study, and took down from my shelf a copy of a commentary on the book of Genesis. I turned to the twenty-second chapter of Genesis which tells the story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice his little boy, Isaac. I never understood that story," he says, "but that night through the teachings of this particular interpreter, he helped me to see that the issue at work here was whether or not Abraham remembered where Isaac had

come from. Did Abraham remember that life is gift, that birth is windfall, that everything we have comes to us through a graciousness that is utterly beyond us? As I sat there in the middle of the night listening to those images out of the book of Genesis, it dawned on me that my daughter was a gift and not a possession; therefore, I had the sense that I could take the road of gratitude rather than the road of resentment out of the valley of the shadow of grief. I began to realize that my choice was mine to make, either living my life with my fist in the face of God or being grateful she had ever been given at all. Jesus would have us to see is that life and everything we possess is truly a gift and not a possession.”

Good grief knows that that over which we mourn is a gift. We are blessed in our mourning when we remember that the reason we mourn is because we dared to love. How blessed we are, how fortunate, when our hearts are open to the strength God gives. And the hard truth of it is, there are some spiritual qualities that cannot be uncovered without the price of suffering and pain.

I’m sure that many of you know Art Linkletter; at least those of us over 40 do. Linkletter is now 96 years old, but many of us remember him fondly, especially the segment of his show called “Kids Say the Darndest Things!” But one of his five children, a daughter, died of a suspected drug overdose and a son died in a tragic car accident. When asked how he could cope with this double tragedy, he replied, “The most difficult thing is to admit the tragedy, to accept it. It is something in your life over which you had no control, and God’s purpose for us, as we all know, is more than we can fathom. Having once admitted and accepted the deep, deep pain of the wound, then you begin to realize that you have expanded your own capability of loving and caring for others. Until you are hurt, you can never truly understand the hurt of others.” Linkletter continued, “Everybody can reflect love and caring. Every person’s life touches some other life that needs love today.” And then he said, “In love’s service only broken hearts will do.”

Our lives will never be like the photos in the old Sears and Roebuck catalog – or like those from Pennies or Macys. We are not beautiful, unblemished perfect people. We have scars and pocks and blemishes. We have parts that are no longer straight, parts that are missing and parts that don’t work right. We’re all half-chewed people, even if you can’t see it from the outside. How strange that Jesus says this is a cause for rejoicing. Yet those who go through the valley of mourning and get to the other side do indeed come out with a new strength, a new depth, and deeper understanding of life, a greater ability to empathize with others, a new power to help others, and a deep sense of closeness to God. How blessed you are when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you, for only then you can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

May we pray? O Lord, we know that because we care deeply, all of us will go through sorrow, all of us will have to face trouble, all of us will grieve and mourn. We ask, O Lord, that

when we come to that place, that you would make your presence known powerfully and dramatically in our lives and give us strength. Be with us, O Lord, as never before. Use our scars and broken hearts to minister to the needs of others. For we pray in the name of him who was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, because he cared deeply, even Jesus our Lord. Amen.

[1] *James Howell, The Beatitudes For Today, page 41.*

[2] *Ellsworth Kalas, The Beatitudes from the Back Side, p. 26.*