Book 9

Sunday March 2, 1980

"BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN" Romans 12:14-16, Luke 19:41-42
Matthew 5:4

"And when Jesus drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace.'" "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

The Beatitudes remind us that we are blessed, we find happiness in places and actions which are surprising. They tell us that happiness comes in ways we don't usually expect. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," or in other words, "Blessed are those who know their spiritual needs." "Blessed are those who mourn," or as another translation has it, "Happy are those who know what sorrow means, for they will be given courage and comfort."

A strange turn of events--the truly happy persons, we are told, are those who mourn, those who know the meaning of sadness and grief. They will find comfort beyond their imagination.

To begin with, lest we misunderstand this beatitude--let it be known that there are kinds of mourning or grief or sorrow that do not produce happiness and comfort. There are destructive kinds of mourning as well as redemptive mourning.

Some time ago a story appeared in the news about a diplomatic officer for the U.S. government who was serving in a foreign country. He was a first-rate college graduate from an Ivy League school. He had a wife and several children.

One day in the mail he received a dismissal notice after years of faithful, high quality work. He had been fired on the spot. Naturally he tried to get to the bottom of the matter, but had no luck. Computers kept answering his questions by mail. When he called Washington, the people in charge were always unavailable. For nine months he tried, frantically, to find out the reasons for his loss of job, but got nowhere. In desperation he decided to look for another job. He discovered that a person who has been dismissed from his last employer can't get a job easily. And so after nine months of trying, grief-stricken and numb with mourning, he took a gun and ended it all. One week later, a letter addressed to the dead

man came, simply stating that there had been some mistake. His records were mixed up with someone else's and they had fired the wrong man. In the meantime, however, his grief had become destructive.

Sometimes too, rather than being comforted, those who mourn and who are filled with grief, find that it simply adds more bitterness to their lives. Listen to this man's story. In one year he lost a son in the war, and he grieved. There was a second son who refused to come back home and enter business with his father and the old man grieved. The father could not understand all this integration and civil rights activity and he grieved. His way of looking at the world was so settled and pat so that when it began to come apart, he grieved.

In one year his brother committed suicide, that same brother's wife died unexpectedly six weeks later of cancer, another brother died in a faraway place, and he mourned. His oldest daughter moved to another state--far away-- because she could not tolerate her father's domination, and he grieved. Another daughter got a divorce, and he grieved. And then his youngest son ran away from college with a young woman from the wrong side of the tracks and he grieved. Is it any wonder that this man was a bundle of resentments? Is it any wonder that he was so critical of the world, the church and everything he saw and touched? Unresolved grief or mourning can choke a person to death. There is a mourning that makes one more bitter. This is not the kind of mourning that Jesus was speaking of.

Then there are the professional mourners, those who are always mourning--perpetually and habitually. There is no joy in this world for them anywhere. These are the people who complain and grieve about everything. They are never happy or pleased. Professional complainers might be a better term than mourners. These are the people who say you can't trust anyone. The forces of evil are always on the verge of taking over the world.

These are not the kinds of mourning Jesus had in mind when he said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. By grief, Jesus did not mean a continual preoccupation with our own troubles. He was not talking about those who are all the time depressed. There are destructive kinds of mourning.

Sometimes too, mourning can be hypocritical or misplaced. One of the persons in charge of a Nazi death camp during the second world war where thousands of Jews were put in gas chambers, had no sadness or remorse about his daily work, but wept bitterly when his pet parakeet died.

A leading business magazine some time ago had on its cover a picture of the Statue of Liberty, and showed this lady with tears running down her cheeks. Why was she mourning? Because the United States was supposedly no longer first in military power. The Statue of Liberty never was supposed to be a statue of power, but of welcome to all those seeking freedom and liberty in this land.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Blessed are those who have honest emotions. Blessed are those who can experience grief and sorrow as well as joy and happiness. To be able to mourn, to cry, to shed tears for the right reasons is to be blessed. To be able to feel sadness is also to be able to feel happiness. Those persons who are cold, emotionless, unfeeling, uncaring, are also those who can never be comforted partly because they can never admit they need comfort of any kind.

But the Christian is not to be that way. "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." That's what St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome. Blessed and happy are those who can feel the pain and joy of others.

Thus the Gospel of John tells us that Jesus wept with the family of Lazarus on learning of his death. "When Jesus saw Mary weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; and he said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Come and see.' Jesus wept."

"Blessed are those who mourn." The mourning that this beatitude is talking about is redemptive. It's the kind of mourning that changes us and brings on changes for the better in society. It's the kind of mourning that makes us more caring, loving, understanding, sensitive persons. It's the kind of sorrow and sadness that makes us stop and ponder and wonder, and then work to change everything around us for the better. This kind of mourning comes from and leads to passionate caring.

Blessed are those who mourn means happy are those who care. And this mourning and caring has more to it than just a private or individualized meaning.

According to the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus was entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he mourned. Here's the way Luke describes it. "When he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'would that even today you knew the things that make for peace.'"

Jesus wept for the false religious values that he saw in Jerusalem. He wept because people would not understand or accept God's love for them. He wept because he knew that many people believed that if they got rid of Jesus the trouble-maker, peace would again be theirs. Jesus wept because of his love for his nation and its capital, Jerusalem, and he could see it all coming apart. "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace."

Most of us can remember back to November 1963, when as individuals and as a nation we mourned the death by assassination of President John Kennedy. It didn't matter whether or not we had voted for him, or whether we liked him or not--we were mourning for more than an individual. Our deep sadness was over the fact that in our nation we try to solve too many problems with a gun. Hopefully that kind of mourning is redemptive. Like Jesus we exclaim, "Would that even today we knew the things that make for peace." Hopefully our mourning was because of our deep love for our country.

I want to speak personally now about a very painful subject and I do so not because I have any special wisdom or answers to the problem, but simply because we Christians must begin speaking and thinking and mourning about such things. I hope many of us today are mourning the arms race around the world, and then I hope our sadness about it will move us to some constructive change in our society.

Recently I read the personal story of a man named Donn Grand Pre, who quit the Pentagon and has since devoted his life to Jesus Christ by establishing a home for deaf-blind children. His book is entitled, "Confessions of an Arms-Peddler." He tells how he was catapulted from an ordinary government worker into the world's most select group of weapons salesmen. In his job he literally covered the earth, meeting with representatives of foreign govern-

ments and helping them arrange for the purchase of U.S. battle tanks, jet fighters, artillery cannon, bombs and bullets, rifles and mortars. He says, "We sold all the marvels of technology designed to kill other people. I looked upon it as a very necessary calling. 'Power creates peace,' my boss at the Pentagon periodically intoned during staff meetings.'Nations evenly matched in arms will negotiate rather than fight.'"

Listen to some more of his own words, his mourning out of love for his country and his fellow human beings around the world. "My boss, Phil Barrett, had unexpectedly quit the Pentagon to take a job at a university. I wondered if he'd tell his young students what the arms business is really like. Would he tell them that producing arms has become such an over-shadowing part of our life that one quarter of our nation's work force is now either directly or indirectly involved in or closely allied in building the machinery of death?"

"Of course he could logically point out that our overseas arms sales help bolster our critical balance of payments. But I also wondered if Phil would tell them about the arming of petty tyrants the world over so they'll jump when their chains are jerked? Or about our peddling weapons to both sides and even providing them with funds like the little Jordanian King of the Hashemites? Both the State Department and the CIA poured millions a year into his pocket, and we, the Defense Department armed him to the teeth. At the same time we did the same for his cousins across the Jordan River. And Congress in its wisdom will either forgive the consequent debts or we'll extend credit to them for twenty years at three percent. I thought about the other leaders who consider their small countries personal fiefdoms. They selectively strip them, tucking a little away in Switzerland or France, or buy up farmland in the U.S. in case they have to leave.

"Maybe Phil will tell them that payoffs flourish in international arms sales just as they do in organized crime and corrupt unions. I saw American mothers and fathers working in a Pennsylvania factory assembling fuses for cluster bombs. Just ordinary people doing their jobs. We peddlers sold them to a Mid-eastern country. Just doing our jobs. A few years later, good mothers, fathers and children in southern Lebanon are shredded into fragments by the same bombs dropped by pilots just doing their jobs.

"I saw sixty Ethopian cabinet ministers and other highly educated officials pulled out of their dank prison cells one cold gray morning. Some were friends of mine--people I had dealt with. They were lined up against a stone wall. Then, young officers who had wrested control of the government gave a signal in the name of the Provisional Military Administrative Council." Four air-cooled light-weight M-60 machine guns filled the prison yard with a roar and the wall behind the men blossomed bright red. I remembered our sales pitch on these guns: 'An effective tool, fires a cyclic rate of seven hundred fifty rounds of steel-Jacketed slugs per minute.' The older men, some cut in half, slumped to the ground which ran with blood. "If the maintenance is good, these guns seldom jam.' These guns cost $4500 each in units of less than twenty. However in quantities of one hundred or more, we offer a highly favorable price of only $3850 each. A sickness welled up within me. It would happen again and again."

I mourn and I hope you mourn also, because of the world's mistaken belief that the more people that are armed the better the chances for peace. I mourn because many of the guns and arms we sell will be used by dictators and petty tyrants against their own people.

When Jesus drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace."

The Spanish philosopher, Unamuno wrote: "I am convinced that we should solve many things if we all went into the streets and uncovered our griefs, which perhaps would prove to be but one sole common grief, and joined together in beweeping them and crying aloud to the heavens and calling upon God. . . .The chiefest sanctity of a temple is that it is a place to which people go to weep in common. It is not enough to cure the plague; we must learn to weep for it. Yes, we must learn to weep!"

Discipleship begins when a person mourns for his or her own sins; the healing of a nation begins when the people of God mourn together for the sins of the country.

I feel sorry for the man or woman who can't cry, just as I feel sorry for the man or woman who can't laugh. If one cannot mourn, one cannot be comforted. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Honest mourning always leads to creative and redemptive change. Amen.