Sunday, January 31, 1999
HAPPINESS AND MOURNING
Matthew 5:1-12

In my experience, no portion of the Bible is so highly praised and at the same time so little known or practiced as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. The same is also true of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. People often talk about the importance of the Ten Commandments but know very few of them. One of my favorite tactics when someone says to me, “The trouble with people in our time is they don’t follow the Ten Commandments,” is to agree and then say, “Would you please recite the Ten Commandments?”

The most widely quoted portion of the Sermon on the Mount is Matthew 5:1-12, the sayings of Jesus which are known as the Beatitudes. In reading and studying the Beatitudes and other parts of the Sermon on the Mount, it is helpful to heed the advice of Mark Twain, who was more honest about his religious practices than many of us are about ours.

He had heard people complain that the Bible is difficult to understand. He said that he was bothered more about the parts of the Bible he could understand than the parts he could not understand. His statement fits the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes in particular.

The word “beatitude” literally means “this is how one finds happiness.” Thus, some of the newer translations of the Bible use the word “happy” instead of “blessed.” “Happy are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” “Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

More than anything else, the Beatitudes tell us how to find true happiness in life. The same is true of many of the Psalms. For example, Psalm 1 begins, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers, but their delight is in the guidance that comes from God.”

Some of us heard a professor last week talk about the Psalms. He said that “happy” is a better translation than “blessed,” especially for people in our time, because so many of us talk about our desire for happiness. On the other hand, we don’t talk much about our desire to be “blessed,” nor do we think of “happy” as being a synonym for “blessed.”

Happy is a popular word and concept. We’re all familiar with the simple sketch of a happy face — a circle with two dots inside for eyes, one dot for a nose, and an upturned line for a smile.

Our culture also gives us many suggestions for finding happiness or what being happy means. Some ideas for happiness are very personal, such as, “Happiness is getting to sleep late on Sunday morning,” or if you’re a four-year-old, “Happiness is not having to take a bath.”

The world is filled with its own kind of wisdom and advice on how to find happiness. The more things you have, the happier you will be, for example. Or, happiness is being able to be completely independent and autonomous. Happiness is being able to do what you want to do.

Personally, I like the song that expresses the opposite point of view: “The more we get together, the happier we’ll be, for your friends are my friends, and my friends are your friends, the more we get together, the happier we’ll be.”

Most of the ways to find happiness described by the Beatitudes completely reverse the conventional wisdom of our culture. In fact, many of the Beatitudes at first glance seem to be contradictions within themselves. That's especially true of the one we're considering today.

"Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." A paraphrase might be: "Happy are those who know what sorrow means, for they will be given comfort and courage."

Lest you misunderstand this Beatitude, let it be known that there are different kinds of mourning, and some of them do not produce happiness or lead to comfort. Some mourning can be destructive, while other mourning can be redemptive.

Here's an example of destructive mourning. There was a man who had a job as a diplomatic officer for the U.S. government in a foreign country. He had been a first-rate college graduate, had a wife and several children. One day, he received a dismissal notice after years of faithful, high-quality work. He had been fired on the spot. 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, he kept getting a recording with a variety of menu options but never could speak to a human being. For months, he frantically tried to discover the reasons for his loss of job, but got nowhere.

In desperation, he decided to look for another job. He discovered that a person dismissed from his last employer couldn't easily get another job. After nine months of trying, grief-stricken and numb with mourning, he took a gun and ended his life. One week later, a letter addressed to the dead man arrived, stating there had been a mix-up with someone else's records, and they had fired the wrong person. In the meantime, his grief had become destructive.

Sometimes, rather than being comforted, those who mourn don't want to be comforted, and their grief only adds more bitterness to their lives. Here's another story. A man lost a son in the war, and he grieved. His second son refused to return home and enter business with him, and he grieved. He couldn't understand the integration and civil rights activity going on at the time, and he grieved. His wife died unexpectedly of cancer, and he grieved. His brother died far away, and he grieved. His daughter moved to another state because she couldn't tolerate his domination, and he grieved. His youngest son ran away from college and married a woman the father didn't like, and he grieved. Is it any wonder this man was a bundle of resentments? Is it any wonder 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 kind of mourning that makes one bitter. This is not the kind of mourning Jesus was talking about when he said, "Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

There are also perpetual mourners — people who are continually sad and depressed. There is no joy for them in this world, and they don't want to be happy or comforted. These are the people who complain about everything. They are never joyful or pleased. "Professional complainers" might be a better term to describe them. Again, this is not the kind of mourning Jesus had in mind when he said, "Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

By mourning, Jesus did not mean having a continual preoccupation with our own troubles. He was not talking about those who are always depressed. There are destructive kinds of mourning that do not lead to comfort and happiness.

However, there are also forms of mourning that are redemptive and therefore bring comfort, which will be followed by happiness.

At its simplest level, this Beatitude reminds us that the happiest people on earth aren't always happy. In fact, the happiest people have their fair share of low moods, mourning, disappointment, and heartache. Often, the difference between a person who is happy and someone who is unhappy isn't how often they mourn, but what they do with their low moods.

When you observe peaceful, relaxed people, you find that when they are happy, they are grateful, and when they are feeling low or mourning, they are also grateful. They understand that both positive and negative feelings come and go, and there will be times when they don't feel good. For happy people, this is okay — it's the way things are. They accept the inevitability of passing feelings.

So when they are feeling depressed or stressed out, they relate to these moods with openness and wisdom. They know that this, too, shall pass.

"Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." This is not to imply that you will be happy while in the process of mourning. Jesus is saying, "Happy are those who have honest emotions. Happy will be those who can experience grief and sorrow as well as joy." To be able to mourn, to cry, to shed tears for the right reasons opens you to being comforted, followed by happiness.

There's another level of mourning that brings comfort to us and to others and therefore also brings happiness.

People who are cold, emotionless, unfeeling, and uncaring can never be comforted because they can never admit they need comfort of any kind. Because of their uncaring attitude, they are unable to connect with others and understand their joy or sorrow.

But the Christian is not to be that way. "Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep," wrote St. Paul in his letter to the church at Rome. You can find comfort and therefore happiness in your connection with others. Happy are those who participate in the joy and pain of others. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus wept with the family of Lazarus on learning of his death.

"Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." The mourning this Beatitude describes 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, and sensitive. It's the kind of sorrow and sadness that makes us stop and ponder, wonder, and then work to change things around us for the better.

"Happy are those who mourn" means "happy are those who care." Caring people rejoice with others and mourn with others.

According to a story in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus was entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he mourned. Luke describes it: "When he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace.'"

Some of us can remember November 1963, when, as individuals and a nation, we mourned the assassination of President John Kennedy. It didn't matter whether or not we had voted for him or whether we liked him or agreed with his policies. We were mourning for more than just an individual. Our deep sadness was over the fact that, in our nation, we still try to solve

problems with violence. We also mourned when Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated. Hopefully, that kind of mourning is redemptive.

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... The chief 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.”

Mourning that connects us with others is redemptive, and through it, we are comforted. In that, there is compassion. Compassion is the act of opening yourself to other people’s joy and sorrow. It is your ability to connect with others, to comfort and be comforted.

We cannot walk around with compassionate openness all the time. Doing so would leave us overwhelmed and in emotional danger. If I kept myself open and compassionate while watching the 10:00 news every night, I would likely never recover from the rush of helpless and hopeless feelings created by all the tragic stories. Sometimes it is necessary to keep your emotional barriers up as a way to protect yourself.

Discipleship begins when a person mourns for his or her own sins; the healing of a nation begins when we mourn for what is wrong in our society.

I feel sorry for the person who cannot mourn, in the same way, I feel sorry for the person who cannot laugh. If you cannot mourn, you cannot be comforted. Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Honest mourning, both personal and connected with others, always leads to creative and redemptive change. Amen.