Book 36

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. That's also true of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. People talk about the importance of the Ten Commandments all the time 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 say, "I agree with you. 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 that he could understand than he was about 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 the word "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 and he said the reason that "happy" is a better translation than "blessed" especially for people in our time is because so many of us talk about our desire for finding happiness. On the other hand we don't talk very

much our desire for being "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 it for the eyes, one dot for the 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

money one has the happier one will be, is a good 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 which expresses the opposite point of view, "The more we get together the happier we'll be, for your friends and my friends and my friends and your friends, the more we get together, the happier we'll be."

Most of the ways to finding happiness described by the Beatitudes completely reverse the conventional wisdom of our culture. In fact many of the Beatitudes at first glance are a contradiction 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 is "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 help you find 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 and 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. 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 one of those recordings with a variety of menu options but never could speak to a human being. For months he tried frantically 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 who has been dismissed from his last employer can't get another job easily. 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 and it stated there had

been some mistake. His records were mixed up with someone else's and they had fired the wrong person. In the meantime his grief had become destructive.

Sometimes too, rather than being comforted, those who mourn don't want to be comforted and their grief then only 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 integration and civil rights activity that was going on at the time. His way of looking at the world was so filled with discouragement that he grieved.

In one year his brother committed suicide, that same brother's wife died unexpectedly six weeks later of cancer and another brother died in a far-away place and he mourned. His oldest daughter moved to another state--because she could not tolerate her father's domination and he grieved.

Then his youngest son ran away from college and married a young woman the father did not like 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 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 is 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 all the time depressed. There are destructive kinds of mourning that do not lead to comfort and happiness.

However there are kinds of mourning that can be redemptive and therefore bring comfort which will be followed by happiness.

At its simplest level and personal level, this Beatitude is reminding us that the happiest people on earth aren't always happy. In fact, the happiest people all have their fair share of low moods, their times of mourning, disappointment and heartache. Often the difference between a person who is happy and someone who is unhappy isn't how often they get low or 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 grateful. They understand that both positive

and negative feelings come and go, and that there will be times when they won't be feeling good. To 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 happi-

ness.

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

Those persons who are cold, emotionless, unfeeling, uncaring are those who can never be comforted because they can never admit they need comfort of any kind. Because of their own 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. Thus 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 is describing is redemptive. It's the kind of mourning that changes us and brings on changes for the better in society. It is 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 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 Jernsalem 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, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace.'"

Some of us can remember back to November 1963, when as individuals and 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 agreed with his policies. We were mourning for more than an individual. Our deep sadness was over the fact that in our nation we still try to solve

too many problems by killing someone. So we mourned when Robert Kennedy was assassinated and when Martin Luther King Jr. was 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 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."

Mourning that connects us with others is redemptive and through it we are comforted and that

leads to happiness. What we are talking about here 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 about 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 most likely never recover from the rush of helpless and hopeless feeling 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 be-

gins when the people of God mourn together for the sins of the country.

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