

They that sow in tears. A sermon preached at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC, February 25, 2018 by Rev. Herb Hilder.

LESSONS JOEL 2:12-13

MATTHEW 5:4

ROMANS 7:14-25

We live in a world of hype – do we not?

Everything is bigger, better, awesome, unbelievable

More than that – everything is great, newer, faster and improved

Every day you are better than ever

Don't worry – be happy!

Put on a happy face

Turn that frown upside down

Don't be so sad

Choose happy

Hope your day is a happy one!

Most of life today is spent avoiding pain and sorrow.

Many will do almost anything to stifle sadness or to stop a tear from falling.

Then we come across a piece in scripture – a word from Jesus that all his followers are to copy and we're taken aback

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. (vs.4)

I wonder, was this Jesus just having a bad day.
Mourning – come on Jesus – there is so much more to life than this.

Yes,

There is, but we ignore mourning in our life at our spiritual and physical peril.

For example,

I often wonder when, not if, but when having no service to mark a life lived,

No celebration of a life lived, will come back and bite the emotional core of surviving family members.

I am not certain a full return to the funeral customs and rituals of my parents and grandparents childhoods is the answer.

Some of these rituals were really over the top as it were.

But to have nothing to mark a life lived – is not really healthy either.

As a society, we have become the reverse of 19th c Victorians – they were awash in death and funeral rituals and afraid of sex.

We have become awash in sexuality and afraid of death and funeral rituals.

With this second beatitude, what IS Jesus saying to his listeners then and now?

Let me begin with the most obvious touchpoint in the verse.

Jesus is speaking about *mourning caused by personal loss*.

Those of us who have been around for a while know what it is to mourn over some personal loss. Many of you have grieved more than once in your life.

Perhaps you have grieved and may still be grieving over the death of a parent, a child, a mate, a friend. Others grieve over the loss of a job, a personal rejection or a loss of health.

If you are a parent – and you never stop being a parent do you?

You may grieve or mourn over the rebellion of your children

Or their poor choices or their bad decisions.

More than one parent has over the years said to me – where did we go wrong?

What ought I have done?

What did we do to deserve this?

Such questions arise from grieving,
From mourning, tears and anxious days and
sleepless nights.

Consider King David's grief and mourning over the death of his son Absalom – killed in battle.

And Absalom was no perfect child – actually far from it, but we find David in profound grief and mourning.

**“O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!
Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my
son, my son!” (II Sam 18:33)**

The shortest verse in scripture, which some say is among the most profound is Jesus’ reaction when he learned of his good friend Lazaraus’ death – **Jesus wept.**

Or your mourning may be the result of the death of a pet.

I remember clearly what I felt like when my parents phoned me to say that my dog had died – and that’s over 40 years ago!

I remember all too well when we took our bunny – Coco – to the Ospika Animal Hospital suspecting he had had a stroke

We brought home an empty cage

He is remembered though – for there is an almost life sized picture of him hanging alongside other family pictures in our upstairs hall.

To those who mourn and grieve any personal loss then, Jesus promises what **-‘comfort’**. Not reversal of what has happened.

Not a soft peddling of the emotional roller coaster of mourning and grief

Not comfort in a syrupy or patronizing way.

No – comfort – A reminder that God does care
A reminder that God will never leave or abandon
us

When we are hurting it is easy to forget this.
 We think God is distant from our suffering,
 Therefore He does not care
 But God cares very much and is there – here.
 How does the Psalmist affirm and declare it?

**The Lord is near to the broken-hearted
 And saves the crushed in spirit (Ps. 34:18)**

God is aware of exactly what we are going through
 The death and resurrection of his son, Jesus, is proof
 that he holds the tattered pieces of our lives in his
 hands and is watching over us
 Nothing escapes his eye
 Every tear we shed, our pain, our suffering matters
 to God.

The Old Testament word for comfort means ‘with
 strength’.

When we mourn then, God wants to strengthen us
 Strengthen us to face the immediate grief and
 mourning and the aftershocks in the days, months
 and years ahead.

Those of you who have attended services
 celebrating lives lived at which I have officiated
 know that a major part of those services is the
 reading of scriptures – God’s promises, particularly
 those promises declaring hope in God.

I do not do this to pad the service – but rather
 because in times of grief, loss and mourning, we all
 need to hear these particular promises of God.

They do not instantaneously remove the grief or the mourning,
 But they do remind us that God is still very much with us,
 Holding us, promising us real comfort
 And frankly in this very uncertain world in which we live, God's promises – particularly those relaying hope in Jesus Christ are ones that we need to trust.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. (vs.4)

Also I believe goes beyond that of mourning over personal losses
 I think Jesus is also reminding us that comfort will come for those who are able to mourn over their sin and the sin evident all about us – for we live in an imperfect and broken world.

All of us fall short of the glory of God.
 Does that come as a shock to you – ALL
 All of us do, say think things that drive wedges between our relationship with God, with others and result in us having conflicts and tensions within ourselves.

We all rationalize too much
 Say things like – “mistakes were made”.
 Read – but we did not or I did not make them!!

We have a lot of trouble at times ‘fessing up as it were – admitting to others, ourselves, even God – this is my fault – I have sinned

I have behaved or spoken in a manner that does not reflect the God I profess to serve and follow!

I appreciate greatly St. Paul’s account of his own often faltering attempt to follow the Lord’s ways

4-16 I can anticipate the response that is coming: “I know that all God’s commands are spiritual, but I’m not. Isn’t this also your experience?” Yes. I’m full of myself – after all, I’ve spent a long time in sin’s prison. What I don’t understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can’t be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God’s command is necessary.

17-20 But I need something *more*! For if I know the law but still can’t keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don’t have what it takes. I can will it, but I can’t *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don’t *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don’t result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. (Roms7:15-20, The message

Is not that narrative of personal experience so accurate?

If we cannot do this,

If we cannot struggle to follow God's ways, with God's help,

Then we will never fully mourn over our sins and therefore will never fully experience the comfort God so eagerly wants to give to each of us.

The first verse of the opening hymn this morning is the call and challenges to do just that – *to mourn our sins,*

To come before God seeking his forgiveness for our sins

Come, let us to the Lord our God with contrite hearts return;

Our God is gracious,

Nor will leave the desolate to mourn.

Jesus does not here suggest in Matthew 5 how we are to get to that point of being aware, Admitting and then mourning our sins, our sinful nature.

The historic church though has over centuries made use of certain practices for self-examination. For that is where all spiritual growth and awareness must begin – with us.

One of the basic practices is called the Daily examen

Ending each day with some reflective questions.

- Where on this day were you particularly aware of God's nearness?
- For what in this day were you most thankful?
- Where were you able to share with others the gifts God has given you?
- Were there any points of this day where you failed to follow God's direction or teaching?
- What happened today that made you sad?
- Ask God to help you as you look forward to a new day tomorrow.

These are not questions asked to make you feel morose, miserable, sullen or unloved by God.

Rather, questions to make you more sensitive and aware of the presence of the Risen Christ –every day and in real ways

Will this examen take time? – yes!

Will it come naturally? – probably not!

Will it make a difference in your life? – if you are serious and persistent – IT WILL make a profound difference in your life and how you see you place in this world!

Jesus also promises comfort as we *mourn for the brokenness of this world.*

This does not mean we assume a position of judgment

The faithful to God have more than enough judgy wudgy people

Rather this is mourning over the clear evidence we have that the world is very much out of joint.

For example, like 1000's around the world I was especially saddened, troubled and angered by the school shooting in Parkland Florida and the media reaction that has followed in the days since.

Saddened because as a parent I can only imagine the level of grief, sense of loss and disorientation and raw anger the families of the 17 victims are going through.

Saddened because I know that for many of the survivors, even some first responders, there is a profound sense of loss of innocence.

Troubled because this is not a one off or isolated incident in the U.S. The figure of 35,000 deaths by gun violence in the US is a numbing figure – it's just under half the population of Prince George.

Angered because I listen to the so called leader of the Free World continue to say – the best way to curb gun violence in the schools is to arm and train good people – teachers.

Then when the bad people with guns think about attacking schools they'll think twice because the school has a number of good people with guns prepared to defend the students.

Madness,...sheer madness....

O Lord, how long...must the American people hold to the right to bear arms as justification to prevent any sort of control of guns legislation.

How long O Lord...must innocent children and young people and their teachers die or be injured and traumatized by gun violence in schools and meeting places.

O Lord, How Long....

The Psalmist cried out the phrase a lot
Over the centuries many others have cried out the phrase and continue so to do.

It is a phrase of mourning and grief ...

It is not an empty cry into space,
But an admission that in the light of so much in the world that is broken or out of joint it is all we can do and say.

Yet in doing it, we are also admitting that God does hear us,

That we are not speaking into a void

Rather, it is a cry asking for God to respond with his comfort and strength.

It is not a cry of emptiness, but of hope

And sometimes as we mourn – whether it is in the light of personal loss,

Personal or corporate sin...it is the best and the only option open to us.