

Fourth Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/A): “Blessed Are Those Who Mourn, for They Will Be Comforted”

Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 5:1-12

January 28-29, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Lessons & Carols took the place of our usual 5 p.m. Eucharist on the 3rd Saturday of Advent this past December. My favorite prayer of the whole year is embedded in that worship service. It’s called the Bidding Prayer, and “bids”/calls us to remember tenderly the world, the church, the last, the lost and the least, the lonely and unloved, the very young and the very old, “those who do not know and love the Lord Jesus,” and then the last petition, which I almost couldn’t get through, because it so power-fully brought to my mind and heart the loved ones whom I miss the most, under the umbrella of:

... all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore, and in a greater light, that multitude which no one can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom in the Lord Jesus we are one for evermore.

Sometimes our personal sorrows bring us to tears. It helps then to embrace our Lord’s promise:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. (Matthew 5:4)

This past Friday, January 27, was International Holocaust Remembrance Day. This year it marked the 78th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz by Allied forces. At least one of our church friends, Joe Walsh, was in a U.S. Army unit that freed the prisoners in one of the concentration camps. He cried when he described the emaciated people he encountered and the unspeakable conditions in which they had lived. Sometimes “man’s inhumanity to man” brings us to tears. And we cling to the promise, for Joe and ourselves:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

This past Tuesday, January 24, 20 or so of us discussed the book *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, a non-profit whose stated mission is:

...providing legal representation to prisoners who may have been wrongly convicted of crimes, poor prisoners without effective representation, and others who may have been denied a fair trial.

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
(Matt. 5:6-7)*

The core story that runs throughout *Just Mercy* is Stevenson's and Equal Justice Initiative's lengthy, complicated, often frustrating but ultimately successful effort to reverse the conviction of a man wrongly convicted of murder, sentenced to execution, banished to death row. Interspersed with chapters about Walter Macmillian's exoneration are the stories of others convicted and unjustly sentenced to death, including 13 and 14-year-olds. It's tough reading. Some of our participants talked about crying as they read, having to take emotional breathers between chapters. Another friend shared she couldn't get beyond the first chapter because the information was **so** upsetting and brought her to tears. To these, our friends, so in tune with the suffering of others, the Lord promises:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

One of our church friends, now part of the Church Triumphant, always had the news on when I would visit. She'd tell me how depressed she was by the state of the world and the volume of suffering she saw reported, day in and day out, from the time she got up till she went to bed. I had no problem being **very** directive and telling her, "Turn off the TV!" I **do** agree with Pastor Tim Krick of Lutheran World Relief who preached to us from this pulpit in December: "**Ignorance may be 'bliss.' But it is not good. It leaves people suffering.**" But our church friend did everything in her power to alleviate the suffering of people within her arms' reach and far beyond. She lived a self-sacrificial life, opening her home to family and strangers, disregarding inconvenience, emotional and financial cost to herself, serving as a Stephen Minister, advocating lifelong for children and for the differently abled. But despite all her efforts and prayers she felt inadequate

as a loving Christian and was being crushed by the global suffering she saw on the news. I knew her tender heart needed a break. She identified so closely with those who suffered she was brought to tears. One of the pavers in our memorial garden walkway describes her as “Mother Teresa of Wildwood Ave.” I claim the promise for our friend named Claire:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

The first of the beatitudes is, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” (Matt. 5:3) Understanding “poor in spirit” isn’t easy so I prefer the paraphrase, “Blessed are those who know their need of God.” How fortunate we are to feel our need of God as acutely as we thirst for water on a hot day or as intensely as we hunger for food after having to fast before surgery, especially if the surgery is later in the day or delayed! During Bible study last week, Peter Seggel shared something he’d read about the beatitudes building on one another. They’re like the rising tiers of a pyramid. First you construct the strong foundation, **then** you build it up, layer by layer. Unless we first know our need of God there’s no comfort that comes from the promises that follow, because there’s no felt **need** for comfort. Unless we acknowledge the existence, all-importance, overwhelming love of our Creator, there’s no joy in being called and claimed as God’s children. Unless “heaven,” the initiation of God’s reign, the beginning of God’s rule captivates us, the coming of the kingdom of heaven isn’t of much interest to us.

Martin Luther said the blessing of the Sermon on the Mount is that it confronts us with Jesus’ expectations and with our clear inability to meet them, so it drives us into the arms of the Gospel. But in love and obedience we still **attempt** to follow Jesus’ lead, and sometimes we **succeed**. Sometimes, by God’s grace, we follow and score a win for the kingdom. Remembering the failed attempts, too, though, is important so we can repent, say we’re sorry, make amends when necessary, when possible.

There is an International Holocaust Remembrance Day so we never forget the deaths of 6 million Jews, plus 6 million others, including the mentally and physically disabled, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, Communists, all those labeled undesirable by the regime. To forget is to be condemned to repeat. "Never again" is the reason to remember. I heard a StoryCorps reminiscence on the radio on Friday, offered by the daughter and granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, Yehuda and Mena Chernachaca (sp.?). They were both imprisoned at Theresienstadt. Mena was so ill she couldn't leave her bed. She had no shoes and no food. After Yehuda met her, he brought her a pair of shoes and a potato. They were married three months later, lived to be liberated, came to the U.S. and had 2 daughters. The couple is now deceased, but the family remembers them on the anniversary of their liberation each year. The observance includes the gifting of each of Yehuda and Mena's grandchildren with a new pair of shoes, and the eating of potatoes at a family meal. Their ritual is a mix of sorrow and joy.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

When we're filled with sorrow not just over our own losses, but over **others'** suffering, we will surely be comforted. When we bear others' sorrows, as Martin Luther put it, feeling their unjust pain so deeply that we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will surely be filled. When the impact on **others** of our failures in love bring us to tears, we will be forgiven. We have to recognize our brokenness before we can be made whole. We have to weep before we can laugh, lament before we celebrate. That's what Lent is all about. Ash Wednesday is Feb. 22. Mark your calendars! Meanwhile, join us these next 3 Wednesdays for our continuing conversation about the beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Speaking of which, here's another beatitude to add to the others: "*Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it!*" (Luke 11:28) Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

