

November 5, 2023
All Saints
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¹⁷ He came down with them and stood on a level place with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases, and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. ²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

²² “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

Sermon

The world in which we live has taught us to move quickly from one thing to the next. We quickly scroll through our social media feeds while we wait in line. We read the headlines of news stories and don't stop to read the whole story. Leaders learn to keep moving forward, or they won't keep their job. Life is fast. What was it that Ferris Bueller said?

“Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.” I bet a lot of us in this room are missing important parts of life because we just keep moving.

All this moving has created a world full of people with short attention spans. Even our hero, Coach Ted Lasso, tells us to be like a goldfish because they have a 10-second memory. Admittedly, there are times when having a short memory comes in handy. For example, it's not good for our mental health to remember and keep track of every awkward moment, mistake, or failure. Best to be a goldfish and move on from all of that. There are times, though, when having a short memory isn't good for us or our relationships. Like, we need to remember the nice thing our partner did for us yesterday, and we need to remember someone's preferred pronouns. Because it's hurtful when we don't.

Our short-term memories can be hurtful to our friends who are grieving as well. When someone experiences a significant loss like the death of a spouse or child or parent, generally, people (neighbors, church members, co-workers) rush in to meet their needs. They bring meals, offer to babysit children, run errands, and stop by the house

to check on things. Everyone drops what they are doing and tends to the family and friends closest to the loss. But then, the day comes when the funeral is over, the extended family goes home, friends go back to work, and in a couple of weeks, it seems like everyone has just sort of moved on.

But everyone hasn't moved on. The people closest to the person who died are just beginning to grieve. It's as if the world doesn't remember that a life has ended, and the lives of others have been turned upside-down. In this season, a loved one is alone in the house for the first time. Now, adult children are sorting through their parents' belongings. They aren't sleeping well. They forget to eat. They must go back to work, but they can't get through the day without crying. And because we have short attention spans, as the days and weeks go by, fewer and fewer people ask how they are doing. Pretty soon, it feels very, very lonely.

No matter where we are on our journeys and no matter how we feel today, I bet there are statements in today's text that do not ring true for you.

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kin-dom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

Each of us comes today from a different place. Some of us may be familiar with what it feels like to live paycheck to paycheck, to struggle to make ends meet. Some of us have experienced times when we weren't sure what or when our next meal would be. I wonder, if you have been there or are there, do you feel blessed? And for the ones who have experienced significant loss in the last year, who haven't gotten through a day without crying yet, do you feel blessed?

I'm in that last group. my dad died last February, and our dog, Shadow, died in September. And it isn't that I haven't laughed at all since their deaths. I have. It's that I still have a painful, physical reaction when I think about them. And I think of them a lot. I haven't reached a place where I can tell stories about them without it hurting. But oddly, talking about them and telling stories is comforting, even though it still hurts. And I wonder, when won't it hurt? So, no, I don't feel blessed.

I wonder if the people Jesus was talking to that day felt blessed or even hopeful that they would feel blessed at some point. Our text this morning is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. This sermon resembles the Gospel of Matthew's more familiar Sermon on the Mount, although it is much shorter. Both sermons are presented as opportunities for Jesus to teach his followers what it meant to follow God's ways; it was also an opportunity for Jesus to offer comfort to his followers who were suffering.

The author of Luke has set this sermon in a place where Jesus has gathered with a large group of hurting people. They presumably traveled from all over - because they were suffering, and they needed hope and resources. First, Jesus addressed their needs,

“...everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.”

And then, before he spoke, he looked up at all of them.

I've been trying to imagine what he felt in that moment.

Once, I was with a group of teens serving a meal in a shelter. We were lined up behind the counter, putting food onto plates as fast as we could. I realized after a few minutes that I hadn't looked up from my task at all. So I did, and I looked up and right into the eyes of a man who was standing across the counter from me, waiting for his plate. We only locked eyes for a second, but I felt like maybe I really saw him and that he knew that he had been seen.

Was that how Jesus felt that day? Or did he feel more like I do the moment all the candles are lit on Christmas Eve, when I look up at all of you and see your faces in the glow of the candlelight as we sing Silent Night? I say this every year...on Christmas Eve, Anna and I have the best view in the room.

Jesus had been busy helping people, and then he looked up and really saw them. Was his heart overwhelmed by the depth of suffering before him? Was he distraught over all the ones he knew couldn't make the journey and, therefore, had not been helped? Did he look around and see reflections of his own suffering? We can imagine, based on his next words, that Jesus saw the struggle around him and felt angry or sad or compassionate or all of it at the same time and then reminded them, and this is a paraphrase, “It isn't supposed to be this way. You shouldn't have to endure these things. You are not alone.”

These followers came to him because they had nowhere else to go. They lived under the thumb of the Roman Empire, and the Empire didn't care about them. As long as taxes were paid and peace (forced peace) was kept, they were forgotten. Some of them were sick; some hadn't eaten, and some had nowhere to go. They all had one thing in common. Their plight was of no concern to the oppressive Empire. They needed to be reminded that they were not alone. And so, Jesus reminded them. The blessedness he spoke of, the comfort he offered, was not a “suck it up, and you'll be fine in a while” thing, it was an offering of hope in that very often, our suffering leads us to the realization that we need God and we need other people. This passage has been more helpful to me when I read it like this:

God is especially near to the ones experiencing poverty.
God is especially near to the ones who aren't sure from where their next meal will come.
God is especially near to the ones who are crying.

Sometimes, we all could use the reminder that suffering, regardless of the cause, invites us to show and accept compassion and to offer and accept companionship. In our world, there are so many ways we and our neighbors face unnecessary barriers that keep them, and all of us, from living the lives we were created to live. Some families experience food insecurity, people get sick and can't get in to see a doctor because it's too expensive or the clinic doesn't accept Sooner Care, women can't get their healthcare needs met in their own state, they get talked over at work, employees are overworked and underpaid, people of color are disproportionately negatively impacted by every single system in our nation, and the list goes on. In fact, there are very few experiences of suffering and pain that are not somehow linked to larger oppressive systems that cause suffering for some and result in profits for others, but there are a few.

One of them is the pain we experience when someone we love dies. We will all experience the death of people we love...people who are poor and people who are rich; gay and straight people, people with all colors of skin. People die. And sometimes, access to the best medical care and financial resources can't fix it. Cancer sucks. Our bodies get old and tired. Some illnesses happen so quickly that help arrives too late. Accidents happen. Sometimes there is nobody to blame. But that doesn't make it hurt any less. When we lose someone we love, empty space is created, and that space will never be filled in the same way. The future will be different because they are gone.

In this part of his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus calls for a different future, not just for the ones who have money, power, community, and resources to share with the ones who don't, but for a total reversal of power: the ones who are weeping right now will laugh again, and the ones laughing will one day weep; the ones who are hungry will be filled, and the ones who have never known hunger will find themselves feeling empty. In our world today, this means the long-term answers to our systemic problems will not be found in food pantries and social services, though they are necessary now. The answers require more than generosity and sharing of our resources. They require a recognition that everything must change. Those of us who enjoy significant privilege must lose it to bring about a new reality in which all people can thrive. Sacrifice is required to bring about this kind of change.

But what about the suffering that some of us are experiencing right now and that all of us will eventually experience? What about the suffering we are experiencing as a result of the empty space in our lives that was previously filled with our spouse, our parent, our child, or even our pet? For most of us, all the justice being done in the

world won't change how we feel. The answer to that kind of suffering is also found in sacrifice. It is found when just this once we don't take Coach Lasso's advice, we do not allow ourselves to be goldfish, but instead, we remember, and we show up for each other. We sacrifice our time and our resources to walk with the ones who are grieving.

It's hard...death and loss bring out the "awkward" in us. We don't want to say the wrong thing and make anyone feel worse. It isn't that we don't remember the stories or want to hear the memories. We fear that talking about the one who died will make someone cry. And the last thing we want to do is make someone we care about cry, right? Dear ones, silence is hurtful.

So, if you don't know what to say, say this, "You are not alone." Let's practice that, "You are not alone."

Beyond that, we should stop villainizing crying. Crying is part of being human. It's a release. Crying is good for us. And just because what you say brings tears to someone's eyes, doesn't mean you have said the wrong thing often it's the opposite: you've said exactly the right thing. Believe me when I tell you, the people who have experienced loss are not going to be suddenly reminded of their loved ones because we bring them up. They remember. And they want us to remember, too.

Sandra, Richard was important to me. I loved him, and I loved our theological banter and when we met, I knew right away that he and I would be good friends. And we were.

Carolyn, Dave was a gentle presence in the world. He was funny and so very talented. We were lucky he was willing to share his musical gifts with us.

Dee, your mum was so generous with her time. I could sit and listen to her stories all day, and there isn't a day that goes by that I don't wish I could. When she told me I didn't ever need to call to ask if I could come to see her, I felt loved. You are not alone. We miss them too.

Talk to me about Shadow. It will make me cry, but sometimes that's what happens when we lose someone we love. It comforts me to know those of you who met him loved him, too. Ask me about my dad. He was funny and smart, and I don't ever want to forget the way he loved me.

Today, Jesus' words remind us that God's response to suffering is compassion and community, which is the response we are called to. Together, we are encouraged to recognize one another's pain, respond to it with physical manifestations of love and resources, and remind one another, tenderly and compassionately, that big feelings, feelings of frustration, weariness, impatience, anger, and deep, deep sadness are welcome here.¹ You don't have to pretend like everything is okay because it feels like

¹ enfleshed, https://enfleshed.com/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce_uploads/2021/03/feb17-0ihbxxr.pdf, accessed 11/1/23.

the world has moved on. You don't have to be okay. Look around, none of us are okay. We are all grieving something or someone in our ways. And this is why we so desperately need each other.
You are loved...more than you know. Amen.

*This sermon relies heavily on commentary from the above issue of enfleshed's "Liturgy That Matters."