

July 8, 2018

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift
"Singing the Blues Into Blessing"

THE READING - Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus* saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

5 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely* on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

SERMON

Today's Beatitude may confuse us. Jesus said: "Blessed are those who mourn – for they will be comforted." How is mourning a blessing?! How do these two things go together? All of us probably want to be blessed, but I doubt that any of us want to mourn! We are more likely to *put off* grief and to avoid sorrow! What do you suppose the disciples and the crowds who listened in heard when Jesus declared this blessing?

The word translated “mourn” carried at least two meanings for 1st century Palestinians. The first group would have heard Jesus speaking to their *losses*: maybe a loved one had died, or they had had to give up their property. You may have a list of losses too that includes such life experiences as the move from one home to another, being let go from your job, a divorce, or the death of a dream.

Preparing for this sermon, and maybe because our son turned thirty-three yesterday, I remembered how as a young mother thirty or so years ago, Steve and I were unable to conceive a *second* child. We went through all the tests and several treatments up to a point when our case was finally diagnosed as “unexplained infertility,” and we joined the 4% in that category. We had wanted and expected a larger family, but it didn’t turn out that way, and it took me quite a while to make peace with that different reality! I don’t remember thinking of this process as “mourning” at the time and as I mostly dealt with it privately. (I wasn’t even a New Englander!)

The second meaning of “mourn” that would have hit home for the original audience has to do with their *longing* for things to be better; it is to grieve over our sins and the sad state of the world. The people listening to Jesus’ teachings would have been thinking about their own personal moral failures. I, for one, get so frustrated with myself, praying the same prayer over and over: “God, please help me be less anxious and more patient!”

The Jews who were listening to Jesus were also an occupied people under Rome, so they wept over the state of their nation, anguished that God’s leadership was not being followed by the leaders on the big stage. They mourned that the world as it was was not the way that God intended or wanted. Indeed, theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote that Christians *should* be dissatisfied with the status quo since they have glimpsed the future that *God* has in mind!¹ A holy dissatisfaction, I would call it.

So when Jesus spoke to their mourning, he connected to their losses and their longings; they felt his solidarity. “Blessed are those that mourn...” To put it another way, when Jesus spoke this beatitude, he was singing the blues with them.

The blues is a genre of music that arises from loss and longing. A man named W.C. Handy ‘discovered’ this type of music in 1903, but its roots go back generations before in African American slave songs, work songs, and spirituals.² Some might argue that the blues go even further back in time if you connect them with the Psalms and Lamentations in the Bible, but the main point is that this style of music is a way of mourning, of honestly expressing to others and sometimes directly to God the toll of trouble in one’s life. Listen to these lyrics:

They call it stormy Monday, but Tuesday’s just as bad.

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¹Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 21-22. The actual quote is: “That is why faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in man. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.” In another place, he continues: [This hope] “makes the Church the source of continual new impulses towards the realization of righteousness, freedom and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come.” Along the same vein, in *The Living God and the Fullness of Life* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016), 23, Moltmann adds: “In human beings, knowledge of the ‘living God’ awakens a thirst and hunger for life ... It makes them dissatisfied with what they are, and impels them to look for a future in which more life will enter the lives they already have.”

²From “What Is the Blues?” The Blues Classroom, pbs/org.

*Lord, and Wednesday's worse; Thursday's oh so sad.
Wednesday's worse; Thursday's oh so sad.
The eagle flies on Friday, Saturday I go out to play.
Sunday I go to church; I get down to pray.
Lord have mercy; Lord have mercy on me.*³

The strange, unexpected effect of this music is that singing the blues comforts.

There's something soothing about the guitar chords, the sliding notes, and the repetition of simple lyrics.

Singing the blues and naming griefs also allows people to *transcend* their experiences. As one singer put it: "The blues is not sad. If you sing about 'em and put 'em in the past, you can laugh at 'em. Man, I made it through that!" In his series, *Journeying Through Grief*, Kenneth Haugk points out that ironically, "when you allow yourself to feel your [losses and longings], these strong feelings *lose* their power over you...but held inside...they *tighten* their grip on you."⁴

An additional benefit to singing the blues is handing our sorrows over to God. Recall how on the cross Jesus cried out from Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" Singing the blues. Julian Cook defines the blues as "the creative masterpiece of discipleship." Or to unpack this concept: "[The blues] is what you get when life forces you to hold to hope while your heart is breaking."⁵

"Blessed are those that mourn, for they will be comforted." With this beatitude, Jesus helps us sing the blues into blessing.

But let me clarify a few finer points. In this beatitude, Jesus does *not* claim that mourning is good in and of itself, nor should we seek out sorrow. He doesn't deny that grief is painful, nor does he argue that you and I must suffer before we can experience blessing. Jesus would *not* advise us to offer this beatitude to others who have just experienced tragedy. In the throes of that moment, they need a quiet presence, or possibly a hug, not a Bible study or a philosophical fix! Furthermore, Jesus is not guaranteeing that the comfort the mourner will receive is a complete restoration of all that has been lost on earth in the afterlife.

Jesus is declaring, instead, that amazingly, our loss and longing can create an opening for God to comfort us – meaning that the Divine can become powerfully present to us in our grief and can work with this grieving world, actively and lovingly, to bring about the promised future: the health and wholeness of all creation!

So I was comforted this week to read that last year the School of Theology at Boston University, my alma mater, offered a combined class with the Law School to train a new generation of prophetic, moral leaders. It would be an occasion for seminarians going into ministry and law students to become more capable of organizing for the sociopolitical and civil rights challenges of today. This is one way that God is blessing the mourners and helping humanity sing the blues into blessing.

³By T Bone Walker and The Allman Brothers

⁴Kenneth C. Haugk, "Experiencing Grief" in the series *Journeying through Grief*, Book Two (St. Louis: Stephen Ministries, 2004), 19.

⁵Julian Armand Cook, "Singing the Blues on a Note of Hope" in *Focus*, Boston University School of Theology, 2018, 22.

God also helped a clergy colleague of mine do the same. When his daughter Devon came into the world stillborn, Peter and his wife were naturally undone and inconsolable. It shook his world, broke their marriage, and strained his faith. Church members and friends respectfully rallied around them with all kinds of good comfort: prayers, casseroles, conversation, and time off – all the ways of a nurturing community of faith. Peter also eventually started a support group called “Still Fathers,” and in singing the blues together, the beatitude became true: their mourning was transformed into blessing!