

## **The Be-Attitudes: 2. Mourning**

Matthew 5.1-12 [The Message]

Mason United Methodist Church

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At one time in your life those who are hearing my thoughts today or will read them later have received devastating words.

- “Your spouse has died.”
- “Your child has been involved in a serious accident. Come to the emergency room immediately.”
- “I regret to tell you that your loved one has passed away.”
- “The report came back from the lab and the cancer has spread and we are unable to treat it with surgery.”
- “It is difficult for me to inform you that you have three to six months to live.”
- “This is the desk sergeant at the county jail. One of your family members is under arrest and would like to speak with you now.”
- “I want a divorce.”
- “I’m sorry to call you on your vacation, but you need to know that early this morning your house caught on fire. The fire department did all they could, but your home has completely burned to the ground.”
- “Dad, Mom, I won’t be coming home anymore.”
- “This is the highway patrol. I need to speak to a family member of...”
- Or, you have a family member in the military service. The doorbell rings and you open it to see a chaplain and another officer standing there in uniform beginning to speak the words, “We regret to inform you...”

For those of you who have experienced these or similar scenarios, you understand the awful feeling of shock, helplessness and *mourning*.

Some of you have not experienced words or traumatic events such as these; but something similar could be a part of your life at an unexpected time in the future. When that time comes, you will know the depths of despair and *mourning*.

What happens to a person when terrible news is received? Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, a physician in Switzerland, spent a lot of time with people who were facing death. She studied how they were affected and wrote a book entitled On Death and Dying (1969) that discussed a cycle of emotional states which have come to be known as the *grief cycle*.

- **Shock** Initial paralysis at hearing the bad news [not a Kübler-Ross stage]
- **Denial** Trying to avoid the inevitable
- **Anger** Frustrated outpouring of bottled-up emotion
- **Bargaining** Seeking in vain for a way out
- **Depression** Final realization of the inevitable
- **Acceptance** Finally finding the way forward

Kübler-Ross's work applies not only to the stages of death for the person diagnosed, but for other family members as well. These stages also are applicable for traumatic scenarios other than death: e.g., divorce, where the loss of relationship and presence is similar to a death but the other person is still living.

The initial shock signals the onset of mourning. The steps in Kübler-Ross's grief process are not sequential, though horrendous shock is generally a person's first reaction; and denial is actually Kübler-Ross's first step. A person does not move through the steps in a 1-2-3 fashion. In fact when acceptance and the desire to move forward finally come, a person can reenter the steps at any point: returning to depression, or anger, or denial.

There have literally been hundreds of times calls have come to be with a family or a person as death approaches. More often than not a call comes that a family member has died and the pastoral work begins. It is often a tough process because plans must be made in a timely fashion, and nothing had been expected. In most cases persons prefer not to discuss their desires. Then death comes, and the family is caught up in new and painfully unfamiliar territory: visiting with a funeral home, selecting the method of preparations for burial, choosing a cemetery, planning for a memorial service or funeral, and writing an obituary for the newspaper.

Other persons have faced the reality of their eventual death and have made the decision to plan ahead in order to take the painful burden off of family members. [My own funeral plans have been written out since September 1976 with edits as the years, and people, have passed.]

People die. People grieve death. What does Jesus mean when he says the words as recorded in Matthew 5, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." What kind of comfort can possibly make any difference? Where can we find comfort?

### **We find comfort in the scriptures.**

God certainly understands grief. God's only Son was put to death on a Roman execution device. When Jesus finally drew his last living breath, the scriptures record the ominous and significant events that took place when Jesus died: graves were split open and those who had been dead were seen in the towns, the veil that separated the area of the temple from the regular priests and the one high priest was ripped in two *from its top*, the thunder roared, and the earth grew dark at three o'clock in the afternoon.

God's words recorded through the book of the prophet Isaiah (40.1-2 NIV) read, "Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, and that she has already received double for all her sins."

And in Isaiah 61.1 words that Jesus would later say regarding himself (in Luke 4.18), "He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted...to comfort all who mourn."

“The Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you.” (John 14.26-27) The Greek word for Comforter (the Holy Spirit) here is *paraclete*, the same word used for an attorney who stands beside an accused and pleads their case. It also means *one who walks alongside*, and *one who remains present*.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of God’s comfort in the book that bears his name, chapter 40, verses 28b-31. [Read]

The Book of Romans gives tremendous hope and comfort in 8.35-39. [Read]

Paul writes hope in his first letter written to the church in Thessalonica (4.13-18). [Read]

John writes a letter from where he has been banished to the Isle of Patmos. In coded words that would be understood by the suffering and persecuted churches and people back home he writes of hope and comfort through the book we know as the Revelation (21.1-7). [Read]

### **We find comfort in the words and actions of Jesus.**

Jesus knew he was going to die and how it would happen. He had spoken of it with his disciples many times; but they chose to avoid that subject.

In John’s gospel story of the death of Lazarus we discover that Jesus really does understand grief. In fact, Jesus himself wept. Did he weep because Lazarus had died? Did he weep because of the unbelief of those gathered around the tomb, even Lazarus’ sisters Martha and Mary? Or was he weeping at the realization of what was about to happen to him not many days hence? What he said to Lazarus’ sisters, he also says to us: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though they die they will live. And whoever lives and believes in me will not die.” (John 11.25-26)

Jesus spoke words of comfort to his disciples, and to us. On another of the occasions he was trying to discuss his coming death with them he spoke the comforting words recorded in John 14.1-3. [Read]

Frank Graeff was a Methodist minister in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century serving some of its leading churches in the Philadelphia Conference. Throughout the area he was known as the Sunshine Minister. In spite of his outwardly cheery disposition and winsome personality, Graeff went through some really tough times in his life. While going through one of the long bouts of despondency, doubt and physical agony, the words of a song came to him.

He turned to the scriptures for solace and strength, and 1 Peter 5.7 became especially meaningful to him during a particular struggle: “Cast all your cares upon Him; for He cares for you.” He worked his way through the grief and penned a song has brought comfort, and will continue to do so.

I remember so well reading the words to this hymn when they were mailed to me on a particularly lonely day where I was a chaplain right on the demilitarized zone in Korea.

Does Jesus care when my heart is pained too deeply for mirth and song –  
As the burdens press, and the cares distress, and the way grows weary and long?

Chorus:

Oh yes, He cares! I know He cares!  
His heart is touched with my grief.  
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary,  
I know my Savior cares.

Does Jesus care when my way is dark with a nameless dread and fear?  
As the daylight fades into deep night shades, does He care enough to be near?

Does Jesus care when I've tried and failed to resist some temptation strong?  
When for my deep grief I find no relief, tho' my tears flow all the night long?

Does Jesus care when I've said good-bye to the dearest on earth to me,  
And my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks – is it aught to Him? Does He see?

Rabbi Zacharias once wrote, "What God whispers to us in our pleasure, [God] shouts to us in our pain."

Amen.