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Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

Good Grief

Matthew 5:4 and John 16:19-24

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Let's be reminded of who is speaking the Beatitudes. Jesus is speaking in the posture and position of Moses but with one important difference. He does not teach like Moses, but even the crowd recognizes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus teaches as one who has authority. What authority is it? It is the authority of the author of life. Jesus designed and created the universe along with the human soul. Through him all things were made. As the divine son of God, Jesus has all wisdom and knowledge. If we deny or disrespect his words in any way, we are in great peril. If we put them into practice, it will bring healing to our flesh, life to our bones and eternity in heaven.

Whom are these words intended for? They were not spoken in a synagogue, a mosque or a church. They were spoken in the open air to crowds of people—Jews and Gentiles—on a sunny hillside in Galilee. They were meant for the entire human race, past, present and future. These are words that cross barriers of language, race, culture or status. They were intended to describe the way to happiness for the entire human family. These words have all authority because they are from God and they are for all people.

“Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). If anyone is going to be happy in this world, it will never be because they escape suffering; it will be because they accept the reality of suffering. In John 16:20, Jesus says, “You will grieve...” It doesn't matter who you are or even how holy you are: you will grieve, you will suffer. The Bible tells us that even God himself grieves. Genesis 6:7 tells us that God looked down at the violence and cruelty of this world, and God said, “I am grieved...” Jesus stood at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, and John 11:35 tells us, “Jesus wept.” Many religions teach people how to escape from suffering, but what is distinctive about the Bible is that it teaches us to bear suffering.

Gert Smith was a pretty tough and hard-nosed woman when I met her. She'd spent a life time serving on the city of Houghton planning commission as well as many decades as a city council woman. She did not suffer fools in her life. I met her as her husband was dying. She had not come to worship for years, and she told me why. Decades before, her

newly married daughter, who was newly pregnant, died tragically in an auto accident. The way Gert told it, her whole life went numb. The church had no meaning to her any more, so she just quit. All emotion drained out of her heart, and she just went through the motions of life—cold, humorless and griefless. After her husband died, she asked me to pray for her. She said, “I want to be able to cry. I want to be able to shed tears. Pray that God will give me tears.”

We started to pray, and she started back to church in fits and starts. Several months later a miracle happened. She came out of the service sobbing; her collar was sopping wet with tears. She embraced me in praise and thanksgiving. God had answered our prayers and had given to her the gift of tears. I can’t tell you how happy she was now that she could actually grieve the sorrows of her life!

When we mourn we need to ask the right question. Some people ask a question like this, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” This is a bad question because it is not looking for an answer. It intended to start an argument. God will never answer this question for that very reason. He knows when you ask it you don’t want an answer, you want an argument.

A better question is this, “What do good people do when bad things happen to them?” The Bible tells us there are two kinds of grief. In 2 Corinthians 7:10, Paul says, “Godly sorrow...leads to salvation...but worldly sorrow brings death.” Godly grief will grow our souls, mature us in love and cause us to abound in hope. But worldly grief leads to despair by way of self-pity, bitterness and resentment. Again attitude is more important than facts. Everybody will grieve but it is the attitude we bring to our grief that makes the difference.

The Bible teaches us not to blame God for the sufferings of life. Death entered the world through sin, not because of God. In the Ten Commandments, God shows us the way to life. They are like the laws of gravity, you can’t really break them, but they break you when you try to defy them. Most of the killer diseases we face these days are because of health habits we don’t want to change. We don’t even listen to our own wisdom when it comes to something like smoking, how could we expect to listen to God’s wisdom if he gave us more? God is not responsible for world hunger—we are. Last time I looked our supermarkets are stuffed to overflowing with food. God has richly blessed the world

with an abundant harvest and a capacity for food production that is far greater than what we have now. The hunger and malnutrition in this world falls squarely on humanity: our selfishness, our sinfulness, our hard-heartedness and our lack of personal responsibility. Death and destruction have come into all of our lives because of human sinfulness.

What is the comfort God can give us then? He is Jesus Christ. At the birth of Jesus, Luke tells us, there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon who was waiting for the consolation of Israel. It had been revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ (Luke 2:25-26). To have Jesus, then, is to have everything. Though we have lost everything, in him we have everything. He is our true home both now and in eternity.

Martin Luther translated the word "mourning" with the German word "leidtragen" which means literally "sorrow-bearing". There are such things as Christian tears, and would that we had more—not less—of them in this world. We need more people who weep because they see God's laws are being broken. We need more people whose hearts are broken by the suffering of hunger, A.I.D.S., or the insane pursuit of nuclear warheads by countries who can't even feed their own people. That's what the CROP walk is all about. We who walk are those who seek the comfort of Christ because we mourn the suffering of this world. We need more people who grieve the lost—those who are living and dying without know Christ as their savior. I can't think of anything more tragic than that.

It has been said that in love's service, only broken hearts will do. Through the wounds and scars of Christ, God has sent his love into our world! And through our own broken hearts we can share love with those around us knowing that Christ is with us, Christ has risen and Christ will come again. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.