

Last Sunday we looked at the first Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We learned that being poor in spirit doesn't have anything to do with our tax bracket or our mental health, rather it has to do with the orientation of our heart. When we turn the orientation of our heart towards God, we learn to be happy or blessed with what we have. We learn to be liberated from our need to always have more. We learn to trust God in the midst of circumstances we would rather not experience. The first Beatitude teaches us that the more we let go of our illusion of control, the more we are able to trust in God's presence, the more we make room for God to direct our steps, the more we will live this first blessing. Maybe that's why the next Beatitude Jesus shares is about mourning. For the process of letting go of things we hold dear, of letting go of our illusion of control, is the process called mourning. Listen to God's word to us today through the second Beatitude Jesus shared with his disciples:

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

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

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

The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God.

This past week at Companions on the Inner Way, I had the privilege of learning from Brian McLaren, a leading voice in contemporary spirituality and religion. His theme was Liberation Spirituality... how do we free ourselves from the ways of our world where some have, some are welcomed, some are powerful, and others not. On Monday morning, we began with the focus of personal liberation spirituality, and his presentation was based on the Beatitudes! What an amazing God-Incident, as I call coincidences! The week with Brian and other Companions on the Inner Way fed my intellect as well as my soul. Thank you again for the opportunity to be away, so soon after my arrival.

I felt as if I was kindred spirit as Brian's Monday presentation began to unfold, for he shared that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, found in the Gospel of Matthew, was foundational for the way in which we as followers of Christ are called to live. Hence, why I believe the Spirit prompted me to plan for us to spend our first Lenten Season together immersed in the Beatitudes. I firmly believe these countercultural blessings are foundational to our ministry together, as we envision our future. As we envision how God will mightily work through us, as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus's self-emptying love.

As he began his presentation, Brian shared an insight that had been shared with him years earlier saying, "American Christians often focus on Paul to the inclusion of Jesus." He noted that a large portion of American Christianity focuses on "saving" the lost to the exclusion of all else. In our reformed language, this saving is by grace through faith. By grace we are liberated from our sin. Yet, focusing on the act of saving alone, while forgetting the invitation of Jesus to participate day in and day out in ushering in the reign of God, misses the core of the gospel. For ushering in the reign of God here and now in the midst of our troubled world is much more demanding, then merely being saved.

Brian calls the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with the Beatitudes, Jesus' manifesto on liberation, Jesus' manifesto of being set free from all that binds us to the ways of the world that are at odds with the way of Christ. And so, our journey together with the Beatitudes continues.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."
Blessing is not the first thing that comes to mind for most of us when we hear that someone is mourning a loss. Yet, what is the context of this Beatitude? What is Jesus trying to teach us?

We have to place ourselves in the text, in the midst of first century Palestine, where the people of God were under Roman occupation. We have to ask ourselves, "How did the Roman Empire become an empire?" How does any empire become an empire? By brute

force, by killing competitors, by killing perceived enemies. Empires generally use violence to build empires. The way of the Roman Empire says that the way to be free is to crush and control your enemies.

This Beatitude is saying there is another way and Brian McLaren provocatively said to us on Monday morning, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they are better off to have lost a loved one than to be the one that killed." My initial response was, "Wow..." and then a deep silence descended upon me and the entire room, for I doubt many of us had ever imagined this interpretation of this Beatitude before.

He went on to share research about battle fields, as battle fields are full of bullets that could have only reached their particular depth, if soldiers intentionally missed by shooting into the ground, rather than killing. There is something within us that bends toward life he shared, even on a battle field, for we are created in the image of God, the one who creates life.

Those who mourn, because they have lost at the hands of another, are freer, are more whole than people who take life, than people addicted to the cycle of violence, which is the way of our world, concluded Brian. My sermon today would have been profoundly different, if I had not spent last week with Brian McLaren, for this understanding has profound ramifications for us, as we envision how to respond when we suffer loss at the hands of another. Will we respond by lashing out and desiring to injure, as we have been injured? Or will we respond bent towards life, even for those who injure us? Will we respond non-violently, interrupting the cycle of violence?

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

What Mary Johnson has experienced is something no mother, no parent, should ever experience: the death of a child. In 1993, Mary's 20-year-old son got into a scuffle with 16-year-old Oshea Israel. Oshea killed Mary's son and spent 17 years in prison paying the price for what he did as a teen. Mary was furious; she believed Oshea was an "animal" and "deserved to be caged."

Yet, years after the sentencing, she felt compelled visit him in prison. "I wanted to know if you were in the same mindset of what I remembered from court, where I wanted to go over and hurt you," Mary tells Oshea.

Wanting to hurt in the face of hurt is the way of our world. The world says this is the way to release anger. This is way to exact revenge. This is the way to be free. But, Jesus says to us through this Beatitude that there is another way.

When Mary visited Oshea she found that he was no longer the 16-year-old boy she remembered. He was a grown man. And so, she shared with Oshea about her son, about his childhood, his antics, his laughter, his love."

Then she did something unexpected when she finished telling his story. She got up and gave Oshea a hug and in that moment, everything changed for Mary and for Oshea. [Pause]

When was Mary most liberated, most free? When she wanted to return injury for injury, when she wanted revenge... the way of the empire? Or when she bent towards life, even though she had mourned the death of her son at the hands of another? Jesus is teaching us another way; a sacred way that even from the grip of death, new life is possible.

Mary; Father Elias Chacour, a Palestinian laboring for peace in Israel; Amish parents in response to the West Nickel Mine school shooting; Mirosalv Volf a Croatian, whose family suffered at the hands of Serbians and so many others, have experienced the liberation of this Beatitude. They are most free, most blessed because they bent towards life.

I remember when I had another profound new understanding of this Beatitude. It was about three weeks after my mother died. I had a presbytery related meeting at a church that happened to have a Labyrinth. A prayer tool that has been used throughout the ages, and one that has blessed me many times over the years.

After the meeting, I decided to walk the Labyrinth, allowing the Labyrinth and the darkened night sky to hold my grief. As I slowly walked towards the center of the Labyrinth, which symbolizes the heart of God, I carried my grief. I remember this time of tears, as sacred space. I also remember, as if it happened yesterday, the profound new insight given to me that night, even though my mom was no longer physically with me, for I knew in an instant that she once again knew my name, knew me to be her daughter and joy erupted within me that I couldn't contain.

You see, my mom had survived West Nile Encephalitis four and half years earlier, but although she regained some of her physical losses, she didn't regain her mental losses. Her husband and children were just nice people who cared for her needs. For four and half years she would look at me and ask with all sincerity, "Will I see Cheryl today?"

My mourning that night was turned into dancing, as I knew without a shadow of a doubt that in God's presence my mom knew me once again, as one of her beloved children. I knew in that instance that I was deeply blessed, simply because I had been loved by my mom and that I had loved my mom. I had received love and I had given love.

Imagine... imagine for just a moment that if there was not love in our lives, there would be no need for mourning. Indeed, "Blessed are those who mourn, for it means that they have loved."

Mary's embrace of Oshea was sacred space. My evening Labyrinth walk was sacred space. Mourning can be sacred space, as we allow the light of God's love to embrace and comfort us. [Pause]

Some of you may know by now that I am a dog owner, Skye and Ally grace our home and so I share with you this dog story from a kindred spirit. A young woman adopted a young dog from a shelter that had been obviously abused by its previous owners. The dog was especially terrified by water. Perhaps someone had tried to drown it. Eventually, of course, the young dog had to be washed thoroughly, especially after running in thickets, picking up insects, and bleeding

from the thorns. When the young woman put the dog into the tub of water, the dog screamed, struggled, and scratched her in terror. Her whole heart hurt for the dog.

She could do only one thing. She climbed into the dirty, bloody bathwater with him. She sat close to the dog, holding him in her arms, stroking him until his panic subsided. Then, still in the bathwater with him, she began to cleanse him gently. She entered into her pound puppy's place of fear, pain and suffering and sacred space was birthed.

Friends, this is our story, for Christ entered the dirty, bloody bathwater of the Roman Empire to show us another way. Christ says to us dare to love, dare to stop the cycle of violence, dare to come along side those who suffer loss, dare to come along side those who mourn... for I will be with you to bring comfort.

Over 400 years ago Teresa of Avila hauntingly reminded us, "Christ has... no hands but yours. Christ has no eyes but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ is to look out on a hurting world."

The question for us to ponder today is: How is God calling us to step into the dirty, bloody, bathwater of our world? Who needs to be accompanied in their fear, pain, and suffering? Will we risk getting dirty, by entering the sacred space of mourning with others again and again and again, trusting that our compassionate God will offer us comfort. "Blessed are those who mourn, dear people, for they shall be comforted." Amen.