

The Beatitudes: Blessed Are Those Who Mourn
Sermon Delivered on October 19, 2014
By Rev. Donna L. Martin

Have you ever heard of something called a paradox? Do you know what it is? Well, the dictionary definition of a paradox is: a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained proves to be well founded or true.

To illustrate the nature of paradox I thought I would share some examples:

Show "Sign not in use" picture.

Show "DiGiorno" picture.

Show "Pinocchio" picture. (First three from:

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/moerder/17-mind-bending-paradoxes-that-will-hurt-your-brain>)

But this is my favorite illustration of a paradox. Show "battered cat paradox." Please do not try this at home.

(https://www.google.com/search?q=battered+cat+paradox&rlz=1C1EODB_enUS524US528&espv=2&biw=1366&bih=643&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=AWhOVKyYK5eAygTRkYDwCQ&ved=0CCkQsAQ#facrc=&imgdii=&imgsrc=QGyN5PDEnGCgLM%253A%3B85vjXXW1cX8VDM%3Bhttps%253A%252F%252Fcatonauts.files.wordpress.com%252F2013%252F09%252Fbattered-cat-paradox-cartoon.jpg%3Bhttps%253A%252F%252Fcatonauts.wordpress.com%252F2013%252F09%252F20%252Fcats-righting-reflex-and-the-battered-cat-paradox%252F%3B798%3B582)

Maybe author and theologian G. K. Chesterton was pondering the battered cat paradox when he defined paradox as "Truth standing on her head to get our attention" (<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/807521-paradox---truth-standing-on-her-head-to-get-attention>).

Well a paradoxical truth is just what Jesus is proclaiming in the second beatitude we are exploring today. Blessed are those that mourn for the shall be comforted. This is sometimes translated as "Happy are the sad." The contradiction in this statement is striking. It seems absurd. This is definitely an illustration of truth standing on her head to get our attention.

Because for most of us, in our normal everyday lives, happiness is something we seek and sadness is something we try to avoid. So to think

sadness produces happiness or even blessedness just does not compute. If mourning is what it takes to be happy then many of us would prefer to live by the words of that Simon and Garfunkel song: "I am a rock, I am island. And a rock feels no pain and an island never cries."

In kingdom-logic, I believe Jesus is telling us that in order to live the abundant life God desires for us in the here and now, we are going to have to be open to all that life offers and brings – both the good and the bad and the happy and the sad. We are going to have to live with our hearts wide open, willing to give and receive love, but in really living and in really loving, we are also going to be opening ourselves to moments and times of sadness. When the things or people that we love are no longer in our lives, we will be sad. But the thing is: if we live our lives trying to protect ourselves from pain and sorrow, as some of us have a tendency to do, we are not really living – we are the walking dead, so to speak.

Father Damien, a Catholic priest who lived in the mid to late 1800's, was a missionary to the lepers on Molokai for thirteen years. In time, he contracted the dreaded disease. He first became aware of this one morning when he spilled some boiling water on his foot and did not feel the slightest pain. At that moment he knew he had leprosy, but it destroys the capacity to feel pain. Being unable to feel pain was the clue that death had come to his body and little by little would take possession of it. How much better for him if that boiling water had caused him pain because then he would know he was healthy and fully alive. How deadly, how life-limiting for us to be unable to feel the pain of our loss and the losses of others (Adapted from the sermon Those Who Mourn by John A. Terry on esermons.com).

I have some personal experience with this particular kind of limited living. My mother, God rest her soul, had the unfortunate experience of being abandoned by her mother at the age of 9. Of course, my grandmother didn't just abandon my mother, she abandoned her entire family. But whereas my mother was devastated by the loss, the rest of the family was angry and hurt. And so my mother was told not to cry – not to mourn her loss. Well, she learned that lesson well. Growing up, I never saw her cry. Only as she aged and had less control of her emotions did I see her get teary-eyed from time to time. I was with her when she was given the diagnosis that she had terminal ovarian cancer. She was stoic as the doctor gave her the news. She didn't cry until the doctor left the room and even then she cried just a little. But then she stopped and said, "It does not do any good to cry. It doesn't change anything." And she dried her tears and never cried again.

Now I am not saying my mother did not feel her grief or the grief of others, but in not being able to show and share her grief, she also closed the door to being comforted. And I would add that, in not knowing how to receive comfort, she also did not know how to give it. She had learned that crying was something to be avoided. It did not do any good. It didn't change anything. But it does. Mourning and tears make us real people – they make us fully alive to all that it means to be human.

Do you remember the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz? He traveled with Dorothy to Oz so the Wizard could give him the gift of a heart – a heart that could feel emotion just as humans do. As the journey progressed, he came to know and care for his traveling companions. When their shared adventures - which included both fun and fear - were over and Dorothy was to return home, the Tin Man began to cry. He said, "Now I know that I have heart, because it is breaking." Never were truer words spoken. Sometimes we are most aware of our hearts and being human when our hearts are breaking. But just as the Tin Man was comforted by his friends, our broken hearts open us up to receive great love – comfort from God and others.

Tears, my friends, are nothing to be ashamed of. Some of you know this and you truly are blessed. Others of us were raised to see tears as a sign of weakness. But in the kingdom language of the beatitudes, tears are a gift of grace from God. Weeping arises from the heart and signifies it is soft, pliable and open. Perhaps that is why so many people are embarrassed to cry; they do not want to reveal their vulnerability. But there is evidence that tears are God's natural way of releasing stress and sadness, bringing greater equilibrium to our body, mind, and spirit. Tears are also a signal to let others know we are in need of comforting. Though our grief is personal, it need not be private. Because, more often than not, when we allow others to share our grief, we find we have much more in common with our fellow travelers through life than we ever realized.

According to a Buddhist legend, centuries ago a woman in grief over her dead child went to Buddha to plead that the child might be returned to life. Buddha sent her on a strange mission, promising to minister to her need when she returned. She was to go and collect a bowl of peppers from families who had not experienced grief such as hers. Mystified, but desperate for help, she undertook the unusual assignment. However, when evening came, the woman returned with an empty bowl, but herself filled with understanding. Mourning tends to be a very personal thing, but it does

not have to be private (From sermon entitled Those That Mourn by John A. Terry).

Experiencing our pain and that of those around us is the route to this blessing we hear in our beatitude of the day. You see, when Jesus taught these words he taught them to the gathered community. These are not private lessons. They are instructions to the community gathered in Jesus' name. When we mourn together in community, when we share our common grief, when we embrace one another, when we call on the presence and power of God, then in God's time God grants us comfort.

I believe mourning is not something we can do by ourselves. If all is well in our lives and world, we can go along thinking ourselves very much in control, but tragic loss forces us to seek strength and consolation beyond ourselves. Blessed is the person who cares intensely for the suffering and the sorrows and the needs of others. Blessed is the one who knows God is the ultimate source of our comfort. Mourning is a response of deep concern, of tender care. It is a godly sorrow. And God has promised that in sharing our sorrow, we shall be strengthened and encouraged (From sermon entitled Those That Mourn by John A. Terry).

A Catholic priest by the name of Henri Nouwen wrote a little book entitled A Letter of Consolation. It was actually a letter Nouwen wrote to his father six months after the death of his mother. At one point he said, "The Lord who died, died for us ... for you, for me, for mother, and for all people. He died not because of any death or darkness in him, but only to free us from the death and darkness in us. If the God who revealed life to us, and whose only desire is to bring us life, loved us so much that he wanted to experience with us the total absurdity of death, then, yes, there must be hope; then there must be something more than death; then there must be a promise that is not fulfilled in our short existence in this world; then leaving behind the ones you love, the flowers and the trees, the mountains and the oceans, the beauty of art and music, and all the exuberant gifts of life cannot be just the destruction and cruel end of all things; then indeed we have to wait for the third day" (From sermon entitled Those That Mourn by John A. Terry).

The Greek word translated as "comfort" means "to call to the side of." This is mourning which calls us to the side of God to receive the comfort given by God. Mourning is a way to God's presence to receive God's blessing. The blessing does not come from the sadness, it comes in being comforted. In

giving our grief and mourning to God, we live with the confidence that what the gospel says is true. This life is not all there is for us or those we love.

Normal people do not go seeking sadness or grief, but when it comes, and it will to everyone, if we allow it to be part of living ALL of life, we are promised God's comfort. On the surface that sounds absurd – almost as absurd as buttered toast on a cat. But "Blessed are those who mourn, for if they could not mourn, they could not love. Blessed are those who do not try to escape pain and suffering, but face it, seeking for its message, letting it bring forth the humanness within them" (From sermon entitled Those That Mourn by John A. Terry - The Pulpit 10/66). Amen.