

“Happy Are the Unhappy”
 Sermon for 1 February 2015
 Texts: Matthew 5:4; Ecclesiastes 7:2-4 & 2 Cor. 7:10

- ² It is better to go to the house of mourning
 than to go to the house of feasting,
 for this is the end of all mankind,
 and the living will lay it to heart.**
- ³ Sorrow is better than laughter,
 for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.**
- ⁴ The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
 but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.**

Ecclesiastes 7:2-4

A grief is too precious to squander, I say, having been in the house of mourning twice just this past month. The Lord does all things well and I receive those two funerals as good instruction on approaching Matthew 5:4: **Blessed are those who mourn, they shall be comforted.** The Wisdom of Solomon and the wisdom of Christ coalesce in this beatitude, in the apparent paradox. But as is often the case, the paradox is built up, intensified, by our cultural setting. We inhabit a culture that embraces distraction and entertainment. The first is a media savvy tool useful in directing modern democracy by dishonesty and spin. By collusion with an administration, or favored party, the media shifts public attention away from scandal and corruption *just as it is being exposed* and affrights the public so that the guilty are removed from the spotlight and justice is thwarted. “Look over here, look over here . . . pay not attention to the little man beside the screen!” The Ferguson affair, now that Officer Wilson has been exonerated by the simple truth: he shot and killed Michael Brown in self-defense. Neither the Grand Jury, nor the Department of Justice found grounds to pursue charges against him—not criminal, nor civil. The posturing of the left, the richly financed outrage and the media complicity served an administration beset with numerous scandals, as well as noncompliance, denial, stonewalling, lying and cover-ups very well. Bury those scandals in ridicule, refuse to pursue an investigation long enough the practitioners of distraction believe and the problem goes away. “It’s old news, let’s move on.”

As for the entertainment factor, our culture has blended pleasure and escapism. The efforts to avoid pain and sorrow are epic, extravagant. We know about this excess since 1985, the date of publication of Neil Postman’s seminal book: *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.* Postman’s focus on television is admittedly dated- most more electronic media, the Internet has joined the fray. I mean, the unhinged pursuit of pleasure, fantasy and escapism. A visit to the house of mourning exposes the superficiality of this culture, its vacuity. In real life conflicts are rarely brought to serial conclusions in 45-48

minute dollops. Romantic conclusions and story lines appear as what they are: scripted encounters and trivial pursuits. They make life more heartbreaking than it has to be, create impossible expectations and fuel irrational discontent. Tragically that discontent motivates people to live on tranquilizers, alcohol and recreational drugs.

The house of mourning intrudes and death disrupts the flow. Jessica Mitford's book, The American Way of Death (1963) is a provocative, even stunning look at our culture's twisted way of putting death aside . . . out of sight, out of mind. Along with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' Death and Dying (1969), Mitford did help us penetrate the fog of entertainment culture. Happy are those who are unhappy with that culture. They have learned the merry and jocund companions are not the only happy men. Life is more than a beer-laden tailgate party at a football game! Being pall-bearer to the "life of the party" tends to sober the gang up. Cosmetically enhanced corpses cannot dispel the dread stillness of the dead. All of us will die. Mourning the loss of friends and loved ones is vital preparation for our own decease. Making your days count for something, enjoying friendship and family are frequent resolutions as mourners exit the funeral home, or memorial service. The liberty to live out a customized pattern of grieving is a healthy thing—that's why I said, a grief is too precious to squander. Drafting your own obituary is a good exercise in being real, and spiritually prepared for what is coming.

It is better to mourn a death than to party. When death comes, and we mourn, Jesus wants us to know we will be comforted. **Blessed are those who mourn, they shall be comforted.** Death is transitory as life. Comfort is coming. The consolation of friends and family is part of that promise of comfort. But there is more. Death reveals that the tipsy mirth of happy men is madness—they are shallow, hollow and self-deceived. At the funeral the thinness of life is exposed, denial is itself denied. For the deceased is now a corpse and corpses, after all the fine tributes and lofty speeches, must be dealt with. Temporal pleasures, passing distractions, the joy that accompanies entertainment become **like thorns crackling under the pot, so is the laughter of a fool.** (Eccl. 7:6)

³ **Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.** It is sorrow that draws family together and "life as usual" only applies to funeral directors and workers at the event. We express our most meaningful memories, experiences—all that made us value life and each other. We stop joking around and we ponder together better ways to live for and with the living. We make phone calls, write notes, express appreciation and love. Parties are enhanced by the intimacy of mourning: they become occasions to be there with one another. We are moved to join the ranks of "those who will not settle for 'sin for a season.' And how do we get there? *For the purpose of the beatitudes is a present one: **Obey My commandments and live.*** The call to obedience means, "Child of God, live more seriously . . . consider well what is necessary and important, eternal and not temporary! Live for what lasts, not for the refuse of life, that which is ripe today and in the compost tomorrow. Ask of your relationships: what is

lasting, then live above the convenient. Yes, inconvenience yourself in living and loving others. Dutifully and in advance, actively mourn your sin, your sin nature from which evil deeds emerge—see how horrific and horrendous the actions are to a holy, loving and just, merciful and forgiving God. *See God for Whom He is, and your choices will startled and dismay you.* **Blessed are they that mourn . . .** they are spiritual awakened, their consciences are clear, alive, functional and . . . healthy. **Why choose death? Live!**

Still unconvinced? Here is poem by Robert Browning Hamilton:

I walked a mile with Pleasure, she chatted all the way
 But left me none the wiser for all she had to say
 I walked a mile with Sorrow and not a word said she
 But oh, the things I learned when sorrow walked with me

The ditty is more helpful than profound, but it makes its point. ⁴ **The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.**

Again, Solomon opens the door into the meaning of the second beatitude. It is wise to prepare our hearts for mourning because grief's are bound to come. But, the good news is that comfort follows loss. Indeed, it often turns out that the greater the sorrow, the greater the joy that follows. That's the blessing in **Blessed are those that more.** When believers grieve, there is a forward thrust to it . . . an anticipated future: Christ is coming, when He comes all sorrow as well as sin, the cause of most sorrow, will cease! No more sorrow, no more pain.

In the meantime, we should take to heart that God is into character. He is far more interested in your growth in character than He is concerned with your condition, or your circumstances! Merriment and pleasure do not move you forward half so much as grief. No, I think that entertainment arrests growth; it causes spiritual stagnation. Choose your houses with care, and wisdom. The house of mirth, the house of mourning . . . which is it to be??

It is good, healthy and wholesome, to lament and mourn your losses. It is a blessing, a gift to grieve. Excruciating pain? (1 Peter 4:12 ^a**Beloved, do not be surprised at the ^bfiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you . . .**) **Your testing** alludes to your growth, refinement, purification . . . of, yes, character is the issue. That you mourn is natural, common; how you mourn should be remarkable as in faith-infused and patient. Lament your health issues, accidental loss and disability . . . relational rupture, estrangements that "eat your heart out." The Word notes: **I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench m couch with tears.** (Psalm 6:6) How does one squander a grief? By settling down in bitterness, self-pity, spiritual dishonesty (that leads to lying about life, God and things that really matter). Rather let your losses lead you to lean on God, increase in faith, grow in compassion, to obtain and secure a ministry of others—for we are **comfort others with the comfort wherewith you (we) have been comforted** as in 1 Corinthians:

Blessed be the ^gGod and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and ^hGod of all comfort, ^{4 i}who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as we share abundantly in ^jChrist's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ^{6 k}If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. ⁷ Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you ^lshare in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

1 Corinthians 1:3-7 ESV

Refresh your memory of David's grief over the death of His infant son, or over Absalom (2 Samuel 18:33); or of Abraham's grief over Sarah (Gen. 23:2). We are instructed in how to grieve as those who have hope!

So what are these comforts? I will short list some of them: We have the comfort of forgiveness, of discovered favor/deliverances and kindnesses, of a lively hope of heaven (this is not the end, this is a new beginning). We have the comfort of knowing that true repentance produces partial forgiveness in the present (I am forgiven) and full forgiveness in heaven (when I am purified and glorified entirely). In between our present state and glory, the Lord purifies, removes impurity and blemishes and dislodges all impediments to our spiritual progress! It helps to know that our lives, our character are in line with His program more than aligned with our wishes, ambitions and designs..

There is more to be gleaned from the second beatitude, sandwiched as it is between the humble and the meek. We shall carry on from here.

Amen.

Psalm 6

Opening Hymn #453 "It Is Well With My Soul"

Closing Hymn #114 "Built on the Rock" (If Needed)