

Believe, Beloved, Blessed

February 13, 2022

I Deserve to Weep

A friend of mine recently told me the story of taking her elderly father to a funeral of an old family friend. She'd been worried about her dad. They had moved her mother to a memory care unit at a local nursing home six months before, and her dad was visiting her mom two, three, sometimes even four times a day. He hadn't been able to make the transition to not centering his day around caregiving to his wife of 62 years.

The funeral was poignant. My friend said that, even more than thinking about the deceased, her mind kept wandering to her mom, wondering if she would be next, worrying about her dad's mental, spiritual, and physical health. In what she later realized was a poignant role reversal, as they walked across the parking lot after the service, she tried to cheer him up, to take his mind off of the funeral and his worries about his wife, by offering to take him to Culver's.

Her dad paused, hand on the car door, barely able to see over the roof anymore, and said, "You don't have to worry so much about me. This terrible disease has taken your mother away from me. Of course I'm sad. Give me time. I deserve to weep."

In our Gospel today, Jesus says, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." With my friend's dad's "I deserve to weep" ringing in my ears, I hear this Gospel a little differently this time when I read it. This time, I hear Jesus saying, "This struggle, this heartache, this pain that you're enduring, I promise you it's not forever. Go ahead, feel the feelings. Don't rush past the hurt. Let yourself feel. And, know that this isn't forever."

The Sermon on the Plane

Most often when we hear these words, we think of the version in the Gospel of Matthew, in which they're part of the Sermon on the Mount. But today we read from Luke, who tells us that Jesus shared this wisdom, after he had come down the mountain. In fact, not only had Jesus come down the mountain, today it strikes me that we read that "Jesus looked up at the disciples."

These aren't some pronouncements from on high, not a proclamation. In a breathtaking power move, Luke tells us that Jesus is situated below his disciples, below the crowd. This teaching, which we'll continue reading next week, this teaching that many understand to be one of the centerpieces of Jesus' ministry, isn't some top-down rigid dogma foisted on us from on high. There's something beautifully symbolic about Jesus being below the crowd, speaking from a low point.

When we're at our low points, when we're struggling, Luke wants us to know that Jesus gets it. Not only is this an interesting power dynamic, that Jesus isn't looking down on the crowd as he's teaching, it also is a rich metaphor that flies in the face of the so-called "Prosperity Gospel"; that is, the popular false teaching that material wealth and worldly success are evidence of God's favor. No, not only what Jesus says but also how he says it tells us that when we're struggling, when we're poor and hungry and mourning and hated and excluded, Jesus isn't looking down on us. In fact, it is in these experiences that he wants us to remember that we are blessed.

Blessed

Now, what does it mean to be blessed? Mourning doesn't feel like a blessing. Poverty doesn't feel like a blessing.

Rev. Mark Larson writes that: "To be blessed is to know that you have God's attention. To know that wherever you go, you will not be alone. To be blessed is to know that you are valued and important."

So often, when we're struggling, be it financially, or in our mental health, or interpersonally, we feel so alone, isolated. When Jesus declares that in these times we are blessed, he's telling us that God sees us, that God hears us, that we have God's attention, that we are God's beloved, just as we were on the day of our baptism.

Recently, I was re-reading Marcus Borg's "The Heart of Christianity," and was reminded that prior to the enlightenment, to believe meant, "to hold dear; to prize; to give one's loyalty to; to give one's self to; to commit oneself. It meant. . . faithfulness, allegiance, loyalty, commitment, and trust." I share this because Borg then goes on, "Most simply, 'to believe' meant 'to love.'"

Indeed, the English words "believe" and "belove" are related. What we believe is what we belove... Faith is about believing God and all that God beloves. Our Gospel today tells us that when we're in those difficult, lonely, isolating states of being, not to forget that we are beloved by God. Unlike formulaic, rule-based spirituality that says, "do this and you'll please God," or "stay within these lines" and "check off these boxes and you'll make God happy," in the beatitudes, Jesus acknowledges that our doubts, our fears, our pain, our struggles, are real. AND, they are not our ultimate landing place. God sees us, we have God's attention, we are God's beloved.

Conclusion

Retired Methodist pastor and poet Steve Garnaas-Holmes ties all of this together beautifully when he writes:

The blessing is not in being poor. The blessing is that the realm of God is yours.
Your poverty, your hunger, your mourning are circumstances. The presence, the fulfillment, the joy of God are yours no matter what.
Your failures are mere passing breezes. But the grace given you is eternal as the stars.
Your riches, your fullness, your merriment, they, too, are passing. But your belovedness is eternal.
Let the winds blow. Let them. You remain in the Beloved.

He also reflects on the passage from the Prophet Jeremiah that we read today

You are rooted in Love, roots way down deep.
Love feeds you. Sustains you. Holds you.
Depend not on your strength, but the love that flows through you.
Now, in this moment, you have what you need.
Root.

Friends, there is so much Good News in our scriptures today. This struggle, this pain, isn't forever. Jesus gets it. God isn't looking down on us and our circumstances. Our pain isn't punishment. In fact, in our pain, in our struggles, that is the very time that God wants us to believe in our belovedness.

And so, our project this week, our service this week, is to be ambassadors of this message: no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, believe that you are blessed, believe that you are beloved.

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Jeremiah 17:5-10, Luke 6:17-27
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