July 14, 2013

**Dream Cruise Through the Beatitudes:**
**“GOOD GRIEF? GOOD GRIEF!”**

Rev. Gary Haller  
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Birmingham, Michigan  
Scripture: Psalms 121, Matthew 5:4

> I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come?  
> My help comes from the Lord,  
> who made heaven and earth.  
> He will not let your foot be moved;  
> he who keeps you will not slumber.  
> He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.  
> The Lord is your keeper;  
> the Lord is your shade at your right hand.  
> The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.  
> The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.  
> The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in  
> from this time on and forevermore. (Psalm 121)

> “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4)

You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.  
(Reading the same from Eugene Peterson’s The Message)

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Harry Crews is a novelist who now teaches at the University of Florida. In 1995 he wrote a book about his growing-up years called *A Childhood*. Crews was born in a one-room sharecropper’s cabin at the end of a dirt road in Bacon County, Georgia. In the middle of the Great Depression when Crews was born, Bacon County was a place of grinding poverty, poor soil, and blood feuds. I especially like a reflection in the book about what would happen when the Sears and Roebuck Catalog would arrive and all the kids would gather around it in goggle-eyed amazement.

He said that no one he knew was anything like those perfect people who modeled the clothing and the underwear in the catalog.
Everybody I knew had something missing – a finger cut off, a toe split, an ear half-chewed away, an eye clouded with blindness from a glancing fence staple. And if they didn’t have something missing, they were carrying scars from barbed wire stretched so tight it broke, or knives or fishhooks. But the people in the Sears catalogue had no such hurts. They were not only whole, had all their arms and legs and toes and eyes on their unscarred bodies, but they were also beautiful. Their legs were straight and their heads were never bald and on their faces were looks of happiness, even joy, looks that I never saw much of in the faces around me.

And then he made this very perceptive observation.

Young as I was, though, I had known for a long time that it was all a lie. I knew that under those fancy clothes there had to be scars, there had to be swellings or boils of one kind or another, because there was no other way to live in this world.

And more than that, at some previous unremembered moment, I had decided that all the people in that catalog were related, not necessarily blood kin, but they knew one another. And because they knew one another, there had to be hard feelings, and trouble between them off and on, and violence, and hate between them as well as love. And it was out of this knowledge that I first began to make up stories about the people I found in the book.

Harry Crews is right, isn’t he? Even those who look real good on the surface usually have a place where they’re not a whole lot different from all the rest of us. We might not see that place very often, they might keep it covered up and hidden most of the time, but it’s there in them as well as in all the rest of us.

In other words, no matter how we look on the surface, we’re not beautiful people – we’ve all been half-chewed by life. We are those who mourn – for we all know sorrow and grief and need the comfort and strength of God.

Laurie and I have just arrived at Birmingham First United Methodist Church. Last Sunday, at our welcoming reception, we met a ton of people. We’re grateful for everyone who is making a special effort to locate and wear your nametags because it will take us the longest time to put names and faces and histories together. But, in so many ways, we already know you. We know from the very beginning that each and every one of you have personally experienced the brokenness of this world. Maybe it’s a struggle with health. Perhaps it’s been a marriage in crisis or challenges with children. Maybe it’s been financial struggles or sorrow over the death of a loved one. For some, it’s been a battle with temptation, with forgiveness, or anger with God. When we’re honest, most of us know well the pain that saturates our world. Life is rarely one smooth Dream Cruise down Woodward Avenue. There are a lot of smashed-up fenders along the way. The bottom line is that none of us are like the people in glamorous catalogs. We’re not completely whole, and so we need the healing and transforming power of the Spirit of God.
The good news – the completely unexpected news – is that Jesus says those who sorrow deeply are close, very close, to the heart of God. This is, of course, counter-intuitive. We don’t look at sorrow as a blessing. We look on mourning, on grief, as a thing to be pitied and avoided. Yet look at this. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn!” When the brilliant Bible scholar William Barclay translated the Beatitudes, he began each sentence not with “blessed,” but with “O the bliss!” “O the Bliss of those who mourn.” That puts this teaching in yet greater relief, and Jesus would have approved.

Let’s take a closer look. Jesus spoke Aramaic, but Matthew was writing for a wide audience, the entire world at the time, and so he interprets Jesus’ words through the Greek language. Matthew translates Jesus’ Aramaic word for “mourning” into the strongest possible Greek equivalent. The word he uses for “sorrow” or “mourning” is *pantheo*. The image is of an almost paralyzing, life-numbing form of grief. *Pantheo* was the word used for grieving deeply, or wailing, as when someone we love dies. It is grief that cannot be concealed. Everyone can see your pain.

When Jesus lived, mourning wasn’t something to be rushed by urging people to get on with their lives, telling them to “get over it,” or by hoping they would “feel better.” Mourners would literally tear the clothes off their own backs. Right out in the open, mourners would scream out in agony, scoop up dirt in their hands and shake it onto the tops of their heads. No one tried to “go to work” or “stay busy” or “put it behind them.” Friends gathered and lingered over their grief. And people would mourn for at least a week in this intense fashion. Those who mourned were not regarded as blissful or blessed. Those who mourned were pitied by those who saw their pain.

We’re not very different from those ancient Galileans, you and I. We do not believe that mourning is a way to happiness or blessing. That idea is utterly strange to us. We have no desire to experience painful loss. The late J. B. Phillips said that if we humans were to write this beatitude to reflect life as we see it, we would say, “Blessed are the hard-boiled, for they never let life hurt them.” And that is the beatitude a good many people live by: Blessed are you if you are never hurt. Most of us have been taught to keep a tough exterior and not to be open to emotional pain. Still, whether publically or privately, all of us have known grief. All of us have known the world’s pain. And not one of us sees it as a blessing. Why in the world, then, would Jesus declare that we are blessed, exceptionally fortunate, when we mourn?

Let’s go back to that word. *Pantheo* has a second meaning, one which is as strong as the first. This is the Greek word that describes sorrow over our sins. I wonder whether you have experienced this? A very few of you may know that in the early days of our country, as Methodists spread across this young country like a tidal wave, there was a very interesting practice. You’d find it particularly when there were revival meetings, but often-times also during regular Sunday meetings. It was called the “mourner’s bench.” It was a little bench or pew that sat in front of the pulpit, right in the center where pulpits used to be placed, and penitent sinners went and knelt at this bench to pray for the forgiveness of their sins and salvation by faith in Christ. This is the place where people came who were at the end of their rope. And if any of you came and prayed in front of the pulpit, I’d know – for sure – that you were at the end of your rope. This bench or seat was placed front and center for those who mourned over the evil and
failings of their lives, those who knew they had no other place to turn than God. In penitence and mourning they came seeking, and receiving, forgiveness of their sins.

I wonder if we maintained a “mourner’s bench” in front of our pulpits today, whether I would have the courage to use it. God knows, I am a half-chewed person like everyone else. I think often and long and with great sorrow over the sin in my life, both the things I have done and those I’ve left undone. I do not regret my mourning because I know it makes me more vulnerable and far more able to love. I would be far less of a human being, and much less of a spiritual being, were it not for the things I mourn and grieve.

Even so, I know a “mourner’s bench” would be an unpopular device, and no doubt that’s why it’s fallen completely off the map. But I’m not fooled by this. I know that many of you, in your hearts, are in some way kneeling and praying because - inwardly - you are grieving. You mourn the pain and brokenness of your life. You grieve over the wrong others have done to you and the wrong you have done to others. You mourn those you love who are no longer near. And then, in this crazy teaching, Jesus says you are blessed. Blessed!

How are we to grasp this? Jesus doesn’t make it easy for us. He doesn’t offer us any explanation, doesn’t provide any exegesis, no explanation based upon the teachings of his heritage. He gives us this terse little teaching and leaves it to us to bring to life. So here’s the new thing Jesus grasped which we need to see. And when we see it, it can change everything. When we’re at that point of utter vulnerability in our lives, we finally see our need for God – and God is finally able to come near to us.

Whether it’s in mourning over our sins, or our crazed grief when we’ve lost that which is most dear to us, that’s when we break through the shallowness and superficiality of our lives – and God is very close. Jesus encourages us to love with real openness and honesty, but such love also brings great vulnerability. The life that risks love to the point of real vulnerability is loving as God intended from the beginning. And when we learn to live and love to the point of vulnerability, even to the point of risking painful loss, we’re close to experiencing the blessing of life at its fullest.

One of the greatest preachers I’ve ever heard was Dr. John Claypool. Claypool grew up as a Southern Baptist and spent the early part of his ministry as a southern Baptist preacher. But he says he got disillusioned and weary of the pressure he felt to always get more converts, more baptisms, to have the biggest church. He said that was all he and his Baptist colleagues talked about, as if they were in some type of contest to see who would win. So Claypool became an Episcopalian, in part because they had absolutely no sense of competition over these things. They say that when Dr. Claypool left the Baptists and became an Episcopalian, the average IQ in each denomination was cut in half.

But John Claypool was a preacher who spoke from the heart. I mention him because one of the most painful and transforming experiences of his life was the death of his only daughter, Laura Lue, to leukemia. It was devastating for him. Laura Lue was only ten. Claypool describes his pain, saying:
Right after she died, I was so filled with sadness. I went down one night to my study, and took down from my shelf a copy of a commentary on the book of Genesis. I turned to the twenty-second chapter of Genesis which tells the story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice his little boy, Isaac. I never understood that story, but that night through the teachings of this particular interpreter, he helped me to see that the issue at work here was whether or not Abraham remembered where Isaac had come from. Did Abraham remember that life is a gift, that birth is a windfall, that everything we have comes to us through a graciousness that is utterly beyond us – and that everything and everyone we have actually belong to God?

As I sat there in the middle of the night listening to those images out of the book of Genesis, it dawned on me that my daughter was a gift and not a possession; therefore, I had the sense that I could take the road of gratitude rather than the road of resentment out of the valley of the shadow of my mourning. I began to realize that my choice was mine to make, either living my life with my fist in the face of God or being grateful she had ever been given to me at all. Jesus would have us to see is that life and everything we possess is truly a gift and not a possession.

Good grief knows that that over which we mourn is a gift. Oh, how blessed we are when, in our mourning, we remember that the reason we mourn is because we dared to love. How blessed we are, how fortunate, when our hearts are open to the strength God gives. And the hard truth of it is, there are some spiritual qualities that cannot be given birth without the price of suffering and pain. As painful as it is for you and me, those who mourn are shedding their illusions about life and are coming to see the depth of their need for God.

Our lives will never be like the photos in the old Sears and Roebuck catalog, or like those from Macy’s or Nieman Marcus. We are not beautiful, unblemished, perfect people traveling in a dream cruise through life. We have scars and pocks and blemishes. We have parts that are no longer straight, parts that are missing and bumpers that are smashed. We’re all half-chewed people, even if others can’t see it from the outside.

How strange that Jesus says this is a reason for rejoicing. Yet those who go through the valley of mourning and get to the other side come out with a new strength, a new depth, a deeper understanding of life, a greater ability to empathize with others, a new power to help others. And, in the end, we come to a deep understanding of our need of God. And then, how blessed we are when we discover that God is here with us.

How blessed you are when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. O how blissful you are when your heart is broken. And yes, how strange it is, for only then can we be embraced by the God who cares for us the most.
May we pray? O Lord, we know that because we care deeply, all of us will go through sorrow, all of us will have to face trouble, all of us will grieve and mourn. We ask, O Lord, that when we come to that place, that you would be with us as never before. Use our scars and broken hearts to minister to the needs of others. For we pray in the name of the One who was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, because he cared so deeply for each one of us. Amen.

¹. I am indebted to Dr. William Barclay for his understanding of the word “mourn” from *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, p. 93, and to Dr. Myron Ausburger for his discussion of “pantheo,” *Communicator’s Commentary: Matthew*, page 63.
