

West Branch Friends Meeting  
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Can We Really be Happy in Mourning?  
Matthew 5:1-4 and 11:28-30

In case no one has mentioned it, we're in the season of Lent, which began this past week with Ash Wednesday. Most of my memories of Lent involve listening to my mostly Catholic friends talking about what they were giving up for Lent, often involving chocolate. Then a few years ago I heard a pastor suggest instead of giving something up, we might want to try adding something to our spiritual lives – more prayer, more meditation, more doing things for others. And I thought that was a good idea.

But now that I'm subscribing to a lot of 'religious' Internet blogs/podcasts, and reading more spiritual books in my capacity here at West Branch Friends, I'm taking this Lent thing a little more seriously and trying to understand the meaning of it a bit more. If you Google the word 'Lent' you have 1,610,000 Internet resources to choose from to get your information. So here's a tiny bit of what I have discovered from one or two sites!

Moses, Elijah, and Jesus observed 40 days of prayer and fasting in preparation for spiritual work. Then, at the end of the 40 days, Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, Elijah talked with God on Mt. Horeb, and Jesus began his spiritual ministry after his forty days of temptation in the wilderness. So, many churches begin this 40 days of prayer and fasting with an Ash Wednesday service, and end six weeks later during the holy week before Easter.

I really liked this definition of Lent I found that says Lent is "a preparation for the resurrection of the mind from the darkness of its sins, doubts, and false beliefs into the light of understanding." And also this, "It's a fast from all unworthy thought, and a feast on the good and the true."

So although in my experience Quakers have not been too involved with Lent, I do think there is never a bad time to focus on a deeper connection with God in our spiritual lives. And I believe Jesus' teachings found in the Beatitudes are definitely some good things to explore a little more deeply, which is what I've wanted to do these Sundays leading up to Easter.

When looking at the beatitudes, the first thing to note is the word 'blessed.' Matthew contains these verses that were originally written in Greek. When the first translators went about rewriting the verses in English, the word 'Blessed' seem to fit the best. Since that time, however, most Bible scholars are quick to assert that the word 'Happy' is actually a better translation of the original Greek word. So I'll continue to refer to the beginning of the beatitude verses as 'Happy.'

In the first verse we spent some time on a couple of weeks ago, we learned that a key to living a happy life is to be poor in spirit...coming to the end of our spiritual rope and realizing we need God. This week's challenge, however, seems even more difficult to me...why would Jesus contend that we are to be happy when we mourn? Another way to say it might be, "Happy are you when sorrow consumes your life." I'm thinking I would have been happier had Jesus said, "Happy are you when you are filled with joy...or have a lot of money...or have a great family." But no, he says we're to be happy when we mourn, or are in sorrow.

I remember a few years ago when talking with my mom and she was complaining that all it seemed like she and Dad got done was go to visitations and funerals. I just laughed and told her they had reached the death and dying stage of life and it probably wasn't going to get any better! So how are we supposed to be happy in times of sorrow?

Perhaps it might be wise to define sorrow, because it can take on many different facets. First we have all had things happen to us that caused us grief and sorrow, death probably being the deepest form of mourning. I've lost grandparents and my dad, aunts and uncles and cousins, and even friends, and I know from experience – as have most of you – that losing a loved one is one of the times when we feel sorrow the deepest.

Mourning is intricately related to the emotion of love and thus we feel hurt whenever love and security are threatened. This is one reason many refuse to get close to another person. The idea is that if we just stay detached and we won't get hurt.

The story is told of James Moore, of Dinty Moore Stew fame, who was the owner of the Dinty Moore restaurant in New York City. Mr. Moore really missed two of his departed cronies and one quiet afternoon their absence grew intolerable so he fixed two packages of meat, wrapped them in butcher paper, climbed into his chauffeur-driven car and went to the Woodlawn Cemetery. At the mausoleum of his friend Sam Harris, the theatrical producer, he placed a beautiful hunk of corned beef and reminded Sam aloud how inconsiderate he had been to die young.

By the time he got to the mausoleum of his other friend, George M. Cohan, considered to be the father of American musical comedy, he was steaming mad. His second parcel contained a fish, which he beat repeatedly on the mausoleum door. "Cohan," he shouted, "In case you didn't know it, today's Friday and I just want you to see what you've missed!" And with that Mr. Moore slipped to the floor and wept. That's the work of mourning...it makes one a bit crazy at times, but it helps create a distance between us and the thing we so dearly want to hold on to.

But there are other times of loss and mourning as well. Sometimes it might be the end of many years of marriage that produces those feelings of grief. I remember the agonizing time when I knew my marriage was not healthy for either one of us, and the guilt, grief, and loss of no longer having a partner in a 'couple's world' was a part of that sorrow I felt. Even though I knew it was what I needed to do to be whole again, it was still a time of mourning for all of our family.

Maybe you have experienced mourning when you didn't get a job or a promotion that you felt like you deserved. I can also remember a time of being one of the two finalists for a principal position in the Iowa City Schools and the deep sadness I felt when the only reason - according to the Iowa City Superintendent at the time - for coming in second was from having been serving as a part time principal in a small rural school with little diversity.

And mourning may just be when old age sneaks up on us and we realize we've lost the essence of our youth when we spend increasingly more time with doctors, we take more medicines, we have more joint aches and pains, and the thought of turning cartwheels in the grass is just a faint memory.

I do believe there are some general truths we can understand that will help us when we are suffering in sorrow. First it's important to just realize that mourning is about loss and change, grief and despair. It's about experiencing a sorrow that is more than an emotion – it is an innermost expression to God, to us, and to the world, through sobs and tears, and aches of the heart. It is sorrow that pierces the heart when mourning has broken into our lives.

But as with all the beatitudes, the reward is in the result. In this case, we have the assurance that when we mourn, we shall be comforted. Of course we always have a choice: we can withdraw and move away from God. Psychiatrists will tell you that there are stages of grief, and anger is one of them. And although this is often true, if we let our anger fester and not allow God's comfort, eventually we isolate ourselves from others.

I have a friend who lost her elderly mother due to complications during a surgery that this friend had finally consented to, knowing there was some risk involved. Instead of seeking God's promised comfort through her church family, immediate family, and friends, she isolated herself for over a year. And sometimes when sorrow is so deep, I will be the first to suggest counseling - and even medication - may be needed for those times when extra sources of comfort are needed to help us through.

I'm not certain we always understand how brain chemistry works and the effect it can have on our thinking as we go through the grieving process. Several years ago one of my most involved parents – a woman who served on my parent advisory group – lost her husband to depression when he took his life. This woman had three sons still in school, one who was still in our elementary school. She had lived with her husband's depression for many years and as she herself slipped into a deep depression, her family tried to get her to consider counseling and

medication, which she refused, in spite of repeated attempts to help her. As the depression affected her brain chemistry and thus her thinking, this wonderful mother picked up a gun, walked out into their cornfield, and took her own life, leaving behind those three school aged boys.

I've also have always found it interesting to note how family members who have lost a loved one and who may have rarely ever darkened the church doors, will sometimes start coming to church for a time after their loss. I remember my aunt's family who were not churchgoers, but when their sixteen-year-old son was tragically killed in a traffic accident, the family were all in church for several Sundays following his death. Whether or not they realize it, they are simply seeking God's comfort that is promised in this beatitude.

So how do we grab hold of this promise of comfort in mourning? First, we have to simply acknowledge the mourning and just understand it is a natural emotion. Then we have to be willing to receive God's promise to be our comforter. Jesus uses the Greek word for comforter that is the same Greek word that is used for Holy Spirit. A simple request on our part allows us to experience the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

And we also need to be keenly aware of others in their mourning. I've occasionally heard someone say to another who is in sorrow, "Oh come on! Just smile!" when that is the last thing the one suffering is able to do. Or maybe we discount the feelings of others by telling them it's not as bad as something we or someone else has had to deal with. Sometimes a gentle arm around the shoulder, a whispered, "I'm so sorry for your loss," or just sharing a sweet experience we've had with the loved one who has passed, are wonderful ways to extend God's comfort.

I know many of you are familiar with Rufus Jones, a well-known Quaker author, theologian and historian. When he lost his eleven-year-old son, he wrote about it with these thoughts.

***"When my sorrow was at its most acute, I was walking along a great city highway when suddenly I saw a little child come out of a great gate, which swing back and fastened behind her. She wanted to go to her home behind the gate, but it would not open. She pounded it in vain with her little fist. She rattled the gate. She wailed as though***

***her heart would break. The cry brought the mother. She caught the little child in her arms and kissed away the tears. "Didn't you know Mother would come? It's all right now." As for me," Jones continued, "in that moment, I saw there was love behind my own shut gate of sorrow."***

In the midst of our tears and whatever mourning may threaten our joy, we, too, need to hear the promise of comfort in Jesus' words as he says to us now:

***"Didn't you know I would come? It's all right now."***

And we have the promise of Jesus from our scripture verses in Matthew 11:28-30:

***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."***

So as we travel through these 40 days of Lent, let's remember for ourselves as well as our loved ones, Jesus' teaching in this beatitude:

***"Happy are we when we mourn, for we shall be comforted."***