**Blessed are those who mourn**

**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

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*Scripture:* Matthew 5:4, Psalm 137, Luke 13:31-35

*Hymns:* HWB 134 – Babylon Streams Received Our Tears, HWB 148 – By the Waters of Babylon, StJ 94 – Blest Are They

I want to start with a bit of a story. It’s the story of Jan and Gary. They were both artist-types – she, a poet and painter, he, a singer-songwriter. They met a bit later in life, in their forties, and connected deeply over their art and their faith. They knew shortly after that their relationship was a lasting one that was life-giving for them both, and were married. Sadly, their marriage ended after only three and a half years. Gary died unexpectedly at the beginning of December 2013, and Jan was left grieving their too-short time together.

 Now this Jan was none other than Jan Richardson, and you might have heard us use her poetic prayers and blessings during various worship services here at NPMC. Her writing is so profound and poignant, and she often writes on the theme of grief, which she knows well after the loss of her husband. Since he died at the beginning of the season of Advent, that season is now a reminder to her each year of Gary’s death. Someone once asked her why she writes so many prayers in the form of blessings, and this is what she said in response: “I have begun to suspect … that one of the primary reasons that I began to compose blessings is because I am in such need of them myself. I learned this most especially after the unexpected death of my husband nearly two years ago. An astounding source of grace and blessing in my life, Gary died at the beginning of Advent, several weeks after experiencing complications during what we had anticipated would be routine surgery. We had been married less than four years.”[[1]](#footnote-1) She goes on to talk about how grief is both challenging and contains moments of grace, writing, “It’s the dailiness of grief that I find most daunting. Morning after morning I wake into a world that does not have Gary in it. I will never find him making breakfast in the kitchen, waiting to enfold me as we begin the day. I will never sit down across from him at the table. I will never call out to him from my studio as he works in his studio. I will never walk into the house and hear him say, Hello, Sweetheart! I will never walk out of the house with him and move together through this world, these moments, this life in the ways we so loved.

“And still, it is in those same moments that grace finds me. It is in those same moments that solace steals in, working its way into the everydayness that can be so daunting but in which love still lives ….”[[2]](#footnote-2) She went on to write a book entitled *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief,* which turned her grief into beautiful words that continue to speak to so many.*[[3]](#footnote-3)* This moment of deep loss in her life had ended up opening her heart and mind to the relationship between loss and love, between grief and blessing, which is not an intuitive connection.

 And yet, that’s also the connection made in our beatitude for this morning: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matt. 5:4). Now, these words are quite familiar to us – the Beatitudes are part of the Sermon on the Mount, which has been a key biblical passage for our faith and theology as a Mennonite church. Because we’re used to hearing these words, we may not think about how strange a statement this actually is. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who are grieving, sad, lamenting. Doesn’t this blessing seem a little premature? After all, it’s the comfort that’s a blessing – that, we can understand. Blessed are those who are comforted when they are mourning. That makes sense. But how can you be blessed before you’ve yet been comforted, while you’re still mourning? But this is what Jesus says.

 Now in order to dig a little deeper into what Jesus might have meant by this, let’s place this verse into its context in the Bible. The Gospel of Matthew is the most “Jewish” of the four gospels, making connections to the Hebrew tradition in which Jesus belonged. And that tradition has a long history of incorporating mourning and grief into the life of faith. This is known as the theology of lament, and it’s reflected very clearly in the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures. We see it, for example, in the book of Lamentations – a book of grief over the destruction of Jerusalem – or the book of Job – grief over the loss of family, livelihood, and health – or in the Psalms of Lament, about various challenging situations and the search for God’s presence and deliverance or saving action. Our Psalm for today, Psalm 137, is one of the most famous lament psalms, perhaps thanks, in part, to reggae singer Bob Marley!

By the rivers of Babylon—
    there we sat down and there we wept
    when we remembered Zion.
2On the willows there
    we hung up our harps.
3For there our captors
    asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
    “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

4How could we sing the Lord’s song
    in a foreign land?
5If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
    let my right hand wither!
6Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
    if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
    above my highest joy. (Ps. 137:1-6)

There are a few interesting things to notice about this Psalm. For one thing, it’s a communal lament psalm – in this case, an expression of grief about the destruction of the city of Jerusalem or Zion by those who have been carried off into exile in Babylon. Now we often think of grief as an individual experience, but here, it is over a collective experience of trauma: the violent destruction of their city and their place of worship, the Temple, and the exile of a large portion of the population, forcibly taken to Babylon as prisoners of war. If you’re familiar at all with the Bible, you know that this was one of the central identity-shaping experiences of the ancient Israelites. Those of us who were part of Women’s Bible Study spent the past number of months looking at the minor prophets, and we know that many of them grapple with this experience of exile. They asked, What did it mean? What was God’s role in it? How could they go on after suffering this catastrophe?

Psalm 137 sums up these sentiments in a prayer of lament that is poignant and raw. The people of Israel don’t varnish over the depth of their pain here – they bring it all to God in prayer. They bring their despair as they collapse by the rivers and weep, as they lose their voices and the joy of song, as their captors torment them. They express their deep longing for Jerusalem, the destroyed city that was their home and the centre of their faith and society. And toward the end of the psalm, they get into something which makes us squirm a bit because it’s so awful: they express their deep anger and their wish for their enemies to suffer violence, for revenge on the Babylonians, for devastating tragedy to befall them, too. They declare,

8O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
    Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

This is quite a typical example of the lament tradition in the Hebrew Bible, but I don’t know if we as Christians or Mennonites are completely comfortable with praying this way. I think many of us have been taught that prayer is supposed to be polite and polished and pious – not a venting of raw and sometimes ugly emotions, like calls for revenge! But this stuff is in our Bible. This is one of many psalms of lament from the book of Psalms, the book that teaches us about prayer. This is part of a biblical tradition that declares that nothing is “off-limits” when we pray – grief, anger, impatience, all of those can be brought to God alongside thanksgiving, praise, blessing, and other more positive prayers.[[4]](#footnote-4)

 Bible scholar Peter Enns (whose most recent book is *How the Bible* Actually *Works[[5]](#footnote-5)* - and of the podcast “The Bible for Normal People”[[6]](#footnote-6)), describes the biblical tradition of lament this way:

“Did the Israelites sometimes experience God as unfaithful to them and accuse God of such? You betcha. They took their grief and anger and stuck it in God’s face.

Did God strike them down with plagues, famine, or thunderbolts for daring to oppose his sovereign wisdom and might? No.

And that’s in the Bible.

What can we learn from this? [Walter] Brueggemann commented:  **“Churches should be the most honest place in town, not the happiest place in town.”**

Maybe we have lost the “art of lament,” where complaining to God is part of the deal. Maybe, rather than playing church and make-believe, a vital dimension of the spiritual journey is giving God an earful now and then. [Maybe God can handle it.](https://peteenns.com/getting-gods-face-act-loyalty/) Maybe God likes it, because it means we are being real and not fake.

Maybe if you’re angry with God now and then, you’re normal. Maybe that’s part of being the people of God.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

To put it another way: Blessed are those who mourn the way the Psalmists mourn.

 I find it striking to notice also that Jesus carries on this tradition of lament. We see glimpses of that in the Gospels. Now, think back to your Bible-quizzing days, those of you who did Bible quizzing. What was the shortest verse in the Bible – does anyone remember? It’s two words: Jesus wept. And that happens when he hears that his dear friend Lazarus has died in John 11. Jesus, God-with-us, is not above experiencing grief in his earthly life. He, too, weeps. He, too, experiences the loss of a loved one, and grieves. That’s a profound thing to think about. And it happens again, in a different way, in our Scripture passage for this morning from Luke. We’re told that Jesus has a disturbing conversation with the Pharisees, who tell him that Herod wants to kill him. This is a death threat from the Jewish governor, who sees Jesus as a troublemaker. This is the ultimate rejection of Jesus’ ministry, and a complete dismissal of the life-giving things he is doing for so many, like “casting out demons” and healing people. And this is the thanks he gets! Out of his deep disappointment and anger, he laments over the city that he has devoted himself to serving: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34). Jesus, again, is not immune to grief and lament, but draws from that Jewish tradition, expressing his lament over the city that he tries to love and protect with great tenderness – with a mother’s fierce love. But this city rejects and threatens him in return – and we know that those threats will ultimately become reality as he is crucified just outside Jerusalem. But for now: blessed are those who mourn, like Jesus mourned over Jerusalem.

 So where does this leave us? Are we better able to understand this Beatitude given its context in the Jewish tradition of lament? This week, I came across a couple of thought-provoking alternate translations of this Beatitude. One reads: “Blessed are those who are sick at heart to see power abused; for they shall be invited to the feast.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This rearticulation of our beatitude highlights for us the way that mourning is not only about our own individual grief, but we also mourn over injustice and situations of violence and the abuse of power, which cause suffering. This is at work in both the Psalm of lament over Jerusalem’s destruction and in Jesus’ lament that Jerusalem rejects and persecutes its prophets – both of these were unjust events, abuses of power that sought to do violence and harm.

Another version I found makes us think by putting the beatitude and a “correction” side by side: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. *Blessed are the comfortable; they shall avoid grief.”[[9]](#footnote-9)* This one really got me wondering about what the alternative to grief is. If Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn,” was he pointing us to the fact that loss of one kind or another is part of life, and certainly a part of the vulnerability of love? Because the alternative to mourning is not happiness, but emptiness, numbness, an inability to feel or love, a denial of our own reality. When the ancient Israelites saw their city and their Temple destroyed, and they were taken away as prisoners of war, it was their oppressors, the Babylonians, who told them to just get over it and sing happy songs. Their natural reaction was grief and lament – so much so that a large portion of the Bible focuses on this event and its aftermath. Many of us have a family history of enduring terrible suffering and violence during the Russian revolution, when our parents or grandparents or relatives lived in what is now the Ukraine. Many Mennonites there were brutalized or killed by bandits, soldiers, or both. Many have stories of parents never sharing what happened to them, of simply pretending it never happened. And I’ve heard some of you wonder whether these experiences of loss were ever properly mourned. Does silence or the avoidance of grief help, or does that pain and trauma then come out in other ways? Even if we never experience something as catastrophic as exile or war, there will be times of grief in our lives: the loss of a loved one, failure, change that we are not prepared for, broken relationships or a loss of connection, witnessing injustice in our world. All of these are things that we grieve, and all of us have or will experience one or more of these. Avoiding grief is not a healthy option – it’s not an emotionally or spiritually healthy way to go through life. So, blessed are those who mourn.

 We today have no shortage of things to mourn. We experience personal losses like Jan Richardson’s loss of her husband. We listen to reports about the climate emergency we are facing as a planet, and experience what they are now calling “climate grief” over what kind of world we are leaving for the children in our lives.[[10]](#footnote-10) As we heard in the Spotlight for today, we also grieve with our Indigenous neighbours over the loss of women and girls who have disappeared or been killed. I was moved to hear about the “Walking with Our Sisters” ceremony that is taking place to honour the missing and dead by placing handmade moccasin vamps (the tops or beaded portions) along the ground. They are not sewed into moccasins but remain unfinished, to represent the lives cut short by violence, and they are placed along the path so that those grieving can symbolically walk with their missing and murdered sisters. What a powerful way to lament. Blessed are those who mourn.

 As Mennonites, we don’t always know how to lament, or how to hold grief. We get mixed up between confession or guilt and lament. We know how to confess our sins before God, but we don’t know how to lament – we see that as self-pity. We want to jump to fixing something and taking action, when sometimes things are not “fixable” – loss and grief take time, and have their own timelines. There is a time to mourn, and then, as our beatitude promises, comfort will come. The blessing will come in its own time, reminding us that we grieve because we love, and that the love remains ours. But in the meantime, let’s not shy away from lament. Let’s take up the thread of that tradition that runs through our Bible, having the courage to be vulnerable before God and each other. As it says in Ephesians 6:2, let’s bear one another’s burdens. Or as it says in the Talmud, the Jewish Bible commentaries:

AMEN

1. Jan Richardson, *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* (Orlando: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015), *ix*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/09/16/blessing-for-the-dailiness-of-grief/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.janrichardson.com/books [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Walter Brueggemann talks about this in his book *The Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Peter Enns, *How the Bible* Actually *Works:* *In Which I Explain How An Ancient, Ambiguous, and Diverse Book Leads Us to Wisdom Rather Than Answers—and Why That’s Great News* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.podbean.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://peteenns.com/when-god-is-unfaithful-reclaiming-a-theology-of-lament/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. From: Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, Third Ed. (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Brian Walsh, <http://empireremixed.com/2017/07/19/beyond-smugness-beatitudes/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/checkup/growing-ecological-grief-is-the-mental-health-cost-of-climate-change-1.4871666> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)