

“The Gifts in Our Grieving”
Matthew 5:4 – February 21, 2016

INTRO: “Most scholars agree that the core of the beatitudes goes back to the historical Jesus, who in these sayings reversed the general value system (of the time).” (M. Eugene Boring) The words may go against common wisdom, yet in the community of those who follow Jesus, they still give us clues about how to live with one another—who we can be for one another, how we can support one another. Today, we turn to the second beatitude.

Jim Stingl is a columnist for *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. His column, “In My Opinion,” can usually be found on page three of the paper. I know, because I usually read what he’s written-- a good writer of human interest stories with regular touches of humor. Like the story about the Holler Bar at 20th & Lincoln, where female patrons have regularly hung their autographed clothing on the ceiling—what’s underneath their blouses. This is the tradition for first time visitors, a fifty year tradition. But a building inspector walked in a couple years ago, declared they were a fire hazard and had to be taken down. People complained, the ban was rescinded and “justice was restored to the universe.” Jim’s headline for that story: “City Bra Ban Doesn’t Hold Up.” (5/16/13)

Just this week, Jim’s stories included: A mover who places the ad for his moving service in the personals, because the personals are on page 1 of the classifieds and more people see them. A story about the oldest Milwaukee retired cop turning 100. A story about a woman who’s flawed lottery ticket finally ended up paying her double her winnings. And an article reflecting on whether the domes are worth saving.

Last Sunday though, Valentine’s Day, Jim’s column appeared on the front page, where it would be hard to miss, with the title “My beautiful wife left us way too soon.” His wife of 34 years, the mother of his three grown children, died of breast cancer on January 25. She had first been diagnosed 15 years ago. What a heartfelt Valentine’s Day story, from someone who has both informed and entertained his readers over the years. By publishing this story, he both honored his wife and made his personal situation very public. He wrote: “I’ve been a mess without her. Tearful. Shaky. Nauseous. Unable to sleep. Lost. I think about a quote I read from a woman who lost her husband to melanoma, who said: She had plenty of people to do things with, but nobody to do nothing with.” (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 2/14/16)

Nobody to do nothing with—nobody to just be with us in our pain. Anne Lamott has said: “When all is said and done, I believe all you can do is show up for someone in crisis, which seems so inadequate. But when you do, your there-ness, keeps someone company when everyone else may be hiding.” (*Traveling Mercies*)

“Mourners quickly learn that the greatest comfort in a time of unspeakable loss is the simple presence of another human being. Blessing may arrive in a person who comes and weeps with you.” (*The Way of Blessedness*)

When someone is grieving, we may not know what to say, what to do, and even though we don’t mean to, we may go into hiding rather than reach out to the hurting person. “We pity those who mourn, we avert our gaze, dash off a note, send flowers. We hope mourners ‘feel better soon.’” (James Howell)

But we may not be the one who chooses ‘to do nothing with’ the hurting person. To just be there. That’s not easy. “Around Galilee, when Jesus lived, mourning wasn’t so rushed or hushed. Mourners would literally tear the clothes off their own backs. Right out in the open, mourners would scream out in agony, scoop up the dirt in their hands and shake the dust out onto the tops of their heads. No one tried to go to work or ‘stay busy.’ Friends gathered and they lingered over their grief for at least a week in this intense fashion.” (James Howell)

“John Wesley once wrote a letter to one of the clergy in his charge accusing the man of ‘inordinate affection’ for grieving the death of his beloved daughter. (Not very pastoral of John I would say.) Though most of us would never say that sort of thing to a grieving parent, we may have heard people comment on a mourner’s composure as a sign of strong faith. Such comments imply that tears, distress, and other shows of strong emotion signal that the mourner is somehow not depending on or trusting God.” (M.L. Redding)

We may be very way off base when we make assumptions about another person's situation or the strength of their faith since only that person knows their own situation, and grieving travels many different paths for all of us.

This beatitude is important for us, because it tells us that not only do we have a role in mediating another's grief, but so does God. There is comfort to be found in our relationships with each other and our relationship with God. "Sorrow can show us, as nothing else can, the essential kindness of humanity and the comfort and compassion of God." (William Barclay)

"We can experience blessing when we mourn because in the terrifying solitude of our pain, we can meet God. Note that this beatitude does not say that all suffering will be resolved or all problems will be resolved. Mourning offers a deeper and better result--our losses and our pain can connect us with God. This is good news for us because, in human terms, when we mourn, (at some level) we are always alone. Only God can know what we mourn." (Mary Lou Redding)

"In the solitude of our tears, we can see God and come to know God at a new depth, because God embraces us and sustains us. When we accept pain and loss as inevitable parts of life, we find that God shares them with us. And that realization changes us as well as the pain. It can also change the way we see life." (Mary Lou Redding)

As we may well know, many times the love of God is expressed to us, through the compassion and care of the people around us. "We cannot believe that God loves us until another person loves us; we cannot believe that God accepts us until another person accepts us. We cannot believe that God cares when we cry until another person cares for us as we cry. This beatitude contains a call to embody God's steady compassion and accepting presence—not for the entire world but for the part of the world right in front of us." (Mary Lou Redding) The world right in front of us--that's manageable.

Martin Marty used to talk about 'the theology of the casserole.' After the death of his wife, many people brought food to his home. Marty wrote of his own former tendency to dismiss such small hospitable acts, denying that they were an expression of any serious theological point. But as he found himself facing, handling, and eating the casseroles brought by loving people, he felt nourished on more than the physical level by these tangible expressions of people's care. Through them he sensed God's sustaining presence." (Mary Lou Redding)

An important aspect of being with someone else in their pain, is that we have to be willing to be vulnerable with one another, to be honest about what's going on. The story is told about Stan who was getting ready to celebrate his 50th birthday. Some of his fondest memories were of his college days and especially those four guys who were his closest friends. They shared secrets, bared their souls, and promised that even though they were graduating and heading off in different directions, they would continue to see one another whenever they could. It didn't happen. They stayed in touch for a while, "mainly to brag about how much money they were making or how quickly they were shooting up the corporate ladder." But those relationships kind of faded into the distance, and Stan decided for his birthday, he would round up his friends. "What was interesting, having not seen each other for so many years, was how differently they treated each other." It didn't take long to get beyond the surface of how they'd each fared in the quest for success. And then the conversations moved to a deeper level. "For the most part, they'd had pretty normal lives, but the more stories that were shared, Stan came to appreciate what they'd all gone through—just ordinary life—what Stan calls the hard side of normal. One of them had had a bout with cancer, another had been divorced, and third had lost their job, and Stan and his wife had suffered through two miscarriages before their first child was born. There had been a lot of water under the bridge for all of them and it showed in their interactions. They asked more questions and they bragged less. Stan felt a kinship with these college friends not just because of what each had accomplished, but for what each had survived; for the curves life had thrown them, throws everyone, and for their ability to love life despite its harsher lessons. Each had weathered his share of storms, and that may have deepened and strengthened their love for one another." (Erik Kolbell)

"Empathy is risky business because when we extend ourselves to a person who is in pain we're allowing their condition to remind us of our own, remind us that what they are bearing is the human condition and the inevitability to which we are all exposed." (Erik Kolbell)

I believe we become those people who love and care for others, when a friend calls in the middle of a personal crisis, and she says to us: "I knew I could call you. I knew I could talk to you about this."

The losses in our lives come to us in so many different ways, the death of someone dear to us, the deterioration of a relationship, the loss of a job, the loss of a dream. But in all those situations, the “hard sides of normal,” I propose we don’t need to move our way through them alone. This beatitude is the reminder that through God, through people, there is the possibility of finding comfort.

“Allowing ourselves to mourn develops our capacity to feel life’s joys. Positive and negative emotions are two sides of the same coin. If we push down our sadness and never face it, we inevitably close off other emotions as well—which limits our experience of life. Yes, being human brings hurts—but it also offers many delights. We explore what it means to be fully human, to be all that God created us to be.” (Mary Lou Redding)

And those important people in our lives, those friendships we count on, those people with whom we share, we may find in the process of that sharing that we have doubled our joys and diminished our sorrows.

-Sue Burwell

