

“Comforted”

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

We live in a vile and violent world where God’s gift of life is routinely disregarded. Mass shootings have become morbidly mundane. Selfishness is celebrated as success. Christian charity has been replaced by entitled indignation. Cruelty in communication has become commonplace. Sexuality has become like a sport that is totally disconnected from the marriage relationship to was created to support. Marriage itself has become a phase in life rather than a life-long commitment. Unborn children have become pawns for political posturing. Compassion for the poor has been replaced by apathetic arrogance, and a veil of death covers everything we experience.

This is the world in which we live. And, on a day when we emphasize the sanctity of life, the hard truth is that we’ve all played a role in this perpetual tragedy. In so many ways, altogether and individually, we have turned in on ourselves and neglected Christ’s call to love our neighbor. In one way or another, we’ve all been quick to point out the speck in the eye of another, without giving a thought to the log in our own. As a result, the descriptions found in the Beatitudes of Jesus are unrecognizable in us, and instead, the church is identified more often by the things it condemns rather than the life-giving Gospel it’s called to proclaim.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn...”, but the truth is, we have forgotten how to mourn, and our collective lack of lament has created proud and hardened hearts that have no room for restoration. I have a friend who, over the years, has repeated a proverb from his grandmother who would tell him, “There’s no one in this world you couldn’t love, if you knew their whole story.” This simple statement has been helpful to me because, the truth is, we all have a story, and often our hardness toward hearing the stories of others is the very way we hide the brokenness of our own.

In his book, “Life Together” Dietrich Bonhoeffer deals with this reality as he writes,

He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final breakthrough to fellowship does not come because, (even) though they have fellowship with one another as believers and devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, the sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So, everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So, we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that all are sinners. But it is the grace of the Gospel, which is so hard for the pious to understand, that confronts us with the truth and says: “You are a sinner. A great, desperate sinner; now come, as the sinner that you are, to God who loves you. He wants you as you are; He does not want anything from you...He wants you alone. God has come to save the sinner.”¹

God knows your story. He sees the truth in your heart. And with full knowledge of who you are and what you’ve done, He sent His one and only Son, and in Christ Jesus, you are forgiven. This is a truth we proclaim each and every time we step into this pulpit, and this forgiving word is no small thing. In fact, this is the one and only thing that brings life into this world of death.

¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 110-111.

On New Year's Eve, one of my favorite pastors died. His name was Jim Nestingen, and in addition to being a world-class theologian, he could communicate the promises of God with a folksy style and vivid voice that spoke straight to the heart. One of the stories he loved to share was about an old pastor he knew who was active in the first half of the twentieth-century. He served a congregation in a small town in the upper-Midwest, and one day this pastor had a visit from a young woman in his congregation. He had performed the young woman's marriage just a few months earlier, and he was surprised when the woman showed up in his office visibly upset. She said she needed to speak with him about something horrible that she had done.

Understanding the importance of the moment, the pastor invited the young woman into his office and opened a confessional service from the hymnal. They began to talk through what the young woman had experienced as she shared her story and told about her early days as a nurse in a large city hospital. Through her work, she met and had become romantically involved with one of the doctors in the hospital. As the relationship progressed, one thing led to another, and she became pregnant. When the pregnancy was discovered, the doctor who had fathered the child told the young woman that she needed to end the pregnancy. He arranged for a late-night abortion to take place as one of his physician friends came in to perform the procedure. Once the pregnancy was terminated, the doctor ended the relationship.

The woman was distraught. She quit her job and returned to her hometown. In time, she began attending her home church. After several months, she met a young man in the congregation, and he took a liking to her. They began to date, and she knew that she should tell him her story, but she couldn't. Then things got more serious, and he introduced the young woman to his family. She knew she should tell him her story, but she couldn't. He proposed to the woman and a marriage date was set. She knew she should tell him her story, but she couldn't. Finally, the wedding day came. They were married in the church and they went on their honeymoon, and she knew she should tell him her story, but she couldn't. As she sat crying in the pastor's office, she told him that now whenever her new husband would touch her, all she could think about was how she had betrayed him. She concluded her confession by telling the pastor, "All I want to do is die."

After hearing the confession, the pastor stood up, put his hand on the head of the sobbing woman, and said, "In the stead and by the command of my Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Go in peace." The young woman stood up, composed herself, and looking down she said, "Thank you, Pastor. Now, I suppose I need to go home and tell my husband the story." Without batting an eye the pastor answered this forgiven sinner with these unforgettable words, "What story?"

What story? That is the forgiveness of sins. Dr. Nestingen concluded by saying the woman returned home to her husband and enjoyed a long and fruitful marriage. Because Jesus had carried her sin, she no longer had to. And this is what forgiveness means. The forgiveness of sins is the only answer to this vile and violent world. The enemy seeks to steal and kill and destroy, but in the blood of Jesus you have been forgiven and no matter what darkness lurks in your past, the Lord has taken away your sin and He remembers it no more (Hebrews 8:12). Your story has been rewritten, your life has been redeemed, the cries of your mourning have been heard, your tears have been wiped away, and you have been comforted. And now, in Christ Jesus, you can deliver the comfort of the cross to others that they too may have life in His name. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. Amen.

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