

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Wonderful News: Blessed are Those Who Mourn
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Psalms 51:1-12; Matthew 5:4

His relationship with his daughter was broken and he was desperate to fix it. The “he” is Misha, a character on the new Netflix drama, “Away.” The show is about the first group of astronauts to travel to Mars. It has become one of Cindy’s and my favorite shows, in part because each of the characters is so human, with great back stories. Misha’s humanness comes from his broken relationship with his daughter. Misha had been Russia’s most famous astronaut, but when his wife, the mother of his daughter died, the daughter asked Misha to stay home with her. He promised he would, but soon realized he was not able to be a good father. So breaking his promise, he sent his daughter to relatives to be raised, and he returned to space. Now he hurtles toward Mars, unsure if he will live or die, he asks his daughter for forgiveness. Her response is chilling. She cannot forgive him because she does not know how. In some ways, I think that King David, the writer of the 51st Psalm, might be wondering the same thing about God.

Psalm 51, according to scholars, is King David’s plea for forgiveness from God following the great Bathsheba incident. As a reminder, the great Bathsheba incident was that series of events where we witness King David break half of the commandments. He coveted Bathsheba. He committed adultery. He lied about their relationship. He stole her from her husband, and ultimately had Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, murdered. For a short time, David thought he had gotten away with it - that no one, including God was any the wiser. But then David was confronted by the prophet Nathan, and his crimes were exposed. David understood that his relationship with this God that had protected him and made him king was broken. In desperation he cried out, “Have mercy on me, O God... blot out my transgression. For I know my transgression and my sin is ever before me.” David deeply desires forgiveness and so in the process, like Misha, he mourns over his sin.

If you are like me, my first impression of this morning’s beatitude is that it refers to mourning over the loss of someone we love. What I discovered in my research is that this is not the case. The Greek word for “to mourn” is used almost exclusively, not for mourning the death of a loved one, but for mourning over sins; mourning over broken relationships. It is the mourning that we do when we know that we have harmed someone by saying something that cuts deep or by doing something that diminishes the other. It is the mourning we do when we have failed to do what we know to be right and that failure breaks relationships or causes harm to another. It is the mourning we do when we know we have broken God’s heart; when we have fallen way short of God’s expectations for us. Perhaps none of you have ever done such things. Perhaps none of you have ever mourned in this way, desiring forgiveness in order to restore a relationship that has been broken, to bring healing into the life of another or to reenter a loving relationship with God. But if you have, you know Misha’s pain. You know David’s pain. But as Jesus teaches this morning, if you have, there is wonderful news for you.

There is wonderful news for you because in Jesus there is comfort to be had. What we need to understand about this “comfort” is that it is not Jesus simply telling us that everything is fine, and we don’t have to worry about what we have done. Sort of like a parent patting a child on the head after they have done something wrong and saying, “Don’t worry it doesn’t matter. It will be alright.” Instead the word implies Jesus coming alongside us, filling us with the power to acknowledge what we have done wrong and giving us the courage to do the hard work to restore the relationship. This kind of comfort matters because our human tendency is to want reconciliation and healing without having do the hard work of making what is broken whole again or

restoring what was lost. Only doing the hard work of confession makes restoration possible. And it is Jesus who brings us this ability. It is Jesus who brings us this comfort, so that we can do the hard work of rebuilding trust and live.

I have to say that at this moment, I considered ending my sermon here, with some great illustration of restored relationships, but I believe God wants me to say something else; to say something about the fact that when Jesus speaks of wonderful news for those who mourn their sins, his audience would understand that he is speaking not just about personal sin and brokenness, but about societal sin and brokenness. For you see, God's people were to be a holy people, living out lives of justice and righteousness in which all people prospered. And when they didn't, the prophets called them out in God's name. When the nation mistreated the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger, and the alien, they broke the heart of God. They broke themselves as a nation, as a holy people. It was in those moments that the prophets called upon the people to mourn: to mourn when they would not release their Hebrew slaves; to mourn when they made their servants work on the Sabbath; to mourn when they crushed the poor. The prophets do so because they know that only through mourning can the nation and its relationship with God be healed.

My friends, I believe that this where we are in our nation today. We are in a moment when the nation is broken; in a moment when the prophets would be calling us to mourn; to mourn our original national sin, if we are ever to be healed. What is that original sin? It is slavery. It is that uniquely American institution that not only treated people as property but led to the institutionalizing of racism in our nation. Some of you may find it curious that I began with slavery and not with racism. I do so because slavery preceded racism. Racism was the result of enslavers having to justify their treatment of those of African descent as animals, as property to be bought and sold. Slavery and its resulting racist ideas permanently marked from the beginning, as Ibrahim Kendi writes, people of color as being less than those whose skin is white. It was slavery and its racist results that led to Jim Crow, to the Klan, to lynching, to discrimination in education, housing and medical care. It was slavery and its racist results that led to movies such as Birth of a Nation and Gone with the Wind, that created stereotypes of black men and women that exist to this day. I realize that even as I say this, many of you will argue with me that we are in a post-racial society in which racism, and especially structural racism, no longer exists. What I would like to do then is to invite you into an experiment that was run several years ago. I invite you to close your eyes...then imagine a drug addict. I don't know what you imagined, but 98% of those in the study envisioned a drug user as a person with black skin. If you did, please realize that there are five times as many white drug users as there are black drug users. Also realize that black drug users are sent to prison at ten-times the rate of white drug users, that while black drug users make up 12% of all drug users they are 59% of all drug users in state prisons. The average sentence for a black drug user is the same as a sentence for a white violent offender. It is slavery and its racist results that keep this nation broken. And until those of us who are white are willing to mourn this history...we as a nation will never heal. But if we are willing, there is wonderful news.

There is wonderful news that if we are willing to mourn, then we will be comforted. If we are willing to mourn, then Jesus will come along side of us and help us confess, repent and do the hard work necessary to begin healing our broken nation. And so that is my challenge on this day, to invite all of us into mourning, not only for our personal sins, but for our nation's original sin, trusting that there is wonderful news because Jesus will indeed come along side us, giving us the courage to do what we need to do to heal our relationships and our nation.