

“Sacred Tears”

#1 in the *BOUNTIFUL BLESSINGS* series

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Texts: Matthew 5:1-4

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8:30 a.m. (Chapel) , 9:20 a.m. (Sanctuary), 10:45 a.m. (Sanctuary)

In the Israel Museum there are treasured ceramic antiquities known as “tear cups.”¹ The Hebrew people in ancient times sought to save their tears. Death in the family... loss of a relationship ... deathly sickness in a child ... defeat in a war. What did the Hebrews do? They cried. And they took out their tear cups and cried into them. Then they capped the cups and saved their tears. Why did they do that? By the end of this sermon, I hope and trust, you will have a clear and helpful answer to that question

Today we begin a new sermon series, “*Bountiful Blessings*,” taking our cue about blessings from the most famous portion of Jesus’ most famous sermon. In the coming weeks we’ll explore Jesus’ definition of what makes a person powerful, Jesus’ soul-healthy diet, the superiority of mercy over vengeance, the essential task of peacemaking, and handling persecution without becoming a victim.

Beatitudes = Blessings

There are blessings aplenty if you are in need of some. There are blessings in abundance for every human need and predicament, regardless of place or station or status. But they will not be found in a self-help book, or from a television religious huckster for \$29.95, or from any number of bogus benefactors – apparently about 10,000 of them live in Africa while another 20,000 live in Malaysia! – who want to negotiate a transfer of wealth to you from a flush account in Nigeria.

Let us be clear: the blessings available to you every day of your life cannot be accessed via the scheme of a “prosperity gospel.” Nor are they to be secured by taking Warren Buffet’s sage advice and following his lead and purchasing Hathaway stock.

The blessings that are yours for the taking are part of Jesus’ most powerful homiletical moment – the Sermon on the Mount. They are commonly called “The

Beatitudes.” Not the “Be-Happy Attitudes” as one mega-church pastor once deemed them. Simply, “The Beatitudes.” Blessings.

These beatitudes are correctly described by George Buttrick – “They are not ‘principles,’ but jets of light and love kindled against the darkness of the age.”²

The beatitudes constitute a different kind of language. They are what Eugene Boring and others have called “performative language.” That is to say, they not only say something, they do something. In their very words, an act is performed. “They do not merely describe something that already is, but bring into being the reality they declare.... Examples of performative language are a baseball umpire’s calling balls and strikes, a minister’s pronouncing a couple husband and wife, a judge’s pronouncing of sentence, and one’s person’s saying ‘I apologize’ or ‘I forgive you’ to another.”³

Let us also note that the beatitudes are not intended for special classes of martyr-like people. Each one of the beatitudes separately and all of them taken together apply to every Christian who yearns to deserve the name. “All the beatitudes apply to [us].... They do not describe nine different kinds of good people who get to go to heaven, but are nine declarations about the blessedness, contrary to all appearances, of the eschatological community living in anticipation of God’s reign.”⁴

Tears Everywhere

This morning we’re seeking to discover how tears and the experience of mourning are as Jesus described them to be: sacred blessings. And more important than their status as holy is how tears can be redemptive for our lives.

To look at the tears that soak through the pages of the Bible is like looking at the snowy ground of South Dakota on a January day from the perspective of an airplane seat, 40,000 feet above the ground: it’s everywhere!

Abraham weeps for Sarah.⁵

And Esau and Jacob fall into each other’s arms and weep over the reconciliation they experience after long estrangement.⁶

And Moses hears the people weeping.⁷

And Samson's wife weeps for him for seven days.⁸

And Hannah weeps over her apparent barrenness.⁹

And Hezekiah weeps bitterly.¹⁰

And Job weeps "for those whose day was hard... for the poor."¹¹

And Qoheleth the preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes, proclaims the famous line we've heard so often, that "there is a time to weep...."¹²

And Jeremiah weeps bitterly "because the Lord's flock has been taken captive."¹³

And Jesus weeps over Lazarus.¹⁴

And then Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, because it does not recognize the time of its visitation.¹⁵

Our Tears

Tears are no strangers to us. Whenever someone suffers loss, especially in our families, and especially in our family of faith, there is always pain in our hearts. Love always extracts some measure of pain whenever there is loss, and tears are love's currency. On at least ten occasions over the past two weeks – like countless previous times – I've had the privilege of sharing in your tears. Death, defeat, dejection, depression – all these and more have caused sadness and anxiousness and no little crying. But also there have been joys and radical elations, and then tears also come. The book of Ecclesiastes pairs weeping with dancing – "a time to weep and a time to dance" – as if they are opposites. Sometimes they accompany the same experience.

All of the tears that we cry are sacred tears because they reveal the depth of our caring and the capacity to share love with one another. All tears are precious and treasurable because they show us the deep connections we have with one another.

For a host of regrettable reasons we don't cry as much as we should. Too often, men and women are taught to bottle up their emotions. "Big boys, big girls, don't cry." Isn't that the mantra we've heard before?

And we do it even in the church in our hymns! In one of our favorite Christmas Carols, "*Away in the Manger*," we hear what has to be a calculated prevarication: "*The*

cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes...." How blatantly and patently absurd!

Rather than shun our tears, rather than deny our tears, rather than evading our tears, we really should treasure them.

I. Treasure Your Tears

I urge you to treasure your tears because they are a true sign of your humanness and your connections with others.

On a sunlit morning in May, Jeff Blum, my best friend during our golden graduate school days in Nashville, Tennessee, and I wept like babies at the time of our graduation from seminary. Part of it was the exhilaration of finishing. Part of it, I am sure, was simply due to the relief that comes with exhaustion. But a huge reason our tears flowed fully and freely was the connections we had established as brothers in the faith and ministers in the gospel. Those were treasurable tears because our relationship was then as it is today – treasurable.

I also urge you to treasure your tears because of the sense of belonging and, sometimes desperate hope, that they indicate.

In the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman* – Zack Mayo, portrayed by Richard Gere, seeks to process successfully through Navy flight school. In the end Mayo achieves his goal and is fulfilled and there's a memorable scene where he gathers up the love of his life in his armk and they walk into the future, accompanied by the music "*Up Where We Belong*." But that's not how the movie starts out.

The training Mayo undergoes is a rigorous and fear-fraught experience, to say the least. Mayo is not the most agreeable candidate for graduation – to become an officer and a gentleman – and Sgt. Emil Foley, portrayed by Lou Gossett, Jr., lets him know it. In one scene Foley has had enough of Mayo's impudence, insolence and incorrigibility, and he ridicules him: "You can forget it! You're out!" And Mayo, with tears streaming down his cheeks and exasperation in every syllable, retorts with seething vehemence, "Don't you do it! Don't! I got nowhere else to go! I got

nowhere else to go... I got nothin' else." Mayo's tears are treasurable, because of his radical sense of dependency on the Navy being the one place where he can belong.

II. Honor the Tears of Others

I urge you also to honor the tears of others. Not by turning away from them but by simply witnessing them with reverence and sensitivity.

Do you recall the tears of defiance and acceptance that are revealed in the character of Private Trip, portrayed by Denzel Washington, in the movie *Glory*? Freed slaves from the South and some life-long free black men from the North sign on to fight for the Union side in the Civil War as part of the 54th regiment. The gallant 54th attracts all sorts, including once-orphaned and severely mistreated Private Trip. In one poignant scene, Trip is caught running off to steal desperately needed shoes. Colonel Shaw orders Trip to be whipped. With great and defiant courage, Trip shrugs off his handlers and takes off his own shirt, to reveal that, as a former slave, he has been whipped before.

As the punishment is carried out, a single tear trickles down Trip's face, a glistening sign of admirable defiance in the face of all the unjustness that Trip has ever faced. Among the onlookers, and among moviegoers, whenever I have seen this memorable movie, there is a palpable sense of honoring awe and respect for what Trip and countless others have endured. Sometimes, when we witness the tears of others, all we really are called to do is respect the experiences of those who weep and offer them the comfort of our honor.

Toward the end of *Glory*, on the eve of a tumultuous battle, Trip gives a brief speech, again with tears welling up in his eyes, as his fellow soldiers gather around a campfire for praying and preaching and making ready for the morrow: "I ain't much about no prayin', now. I ain't never had no family, and... [they] killed off my mama... Y'all's the onliest family I got. I love the 54th. Ain't even much a matter what happens tomorrow, 'cause we men, ain't we?"

In Trip's words, as in his eyes, are the signs of a holy acceptance of his own innate worth as a human being. Again, in the face of such a scene, all one can do is honor the tears of a man who is coming into full humanity and resolute dignity.

III. Your Tears and the Tears of Others are Moments of Redemption

Tears are sacred in this way, too: as occasions of redemption. I urge you to do as the Apostle Paul urged the early Christians: "... weep with those who weep..."¹⁶ Sometimes we are called to accompany one another along some torturous routes to salvation. And there are always tears along the way.

Those of you who have held the hand of a recovering addict know this reality.

Those of you who've struggled beside your child as she overcomes a learning disability know this reality.

Those of you who've had a sibling with debilitating disease or a chronic pain know this reality.

Those of you who've been through a bankruptcy or divorce or the devastation of a downsizing layoff know this reality.

As sacred tears flow, sometimes all we can and should do is weep with those who weep. Let's never disparage such weeping but rather know that we are privileged to be part of another's - and sometimes our own - redemption.

Please allow one more movie reference, but this one is too powerful to exclude from this morning's preachment.

In the movie *The Mission*, Rodrigo Mendoza, portrayed by Robert De Niro, is a former slave trader in Brazil who slays his brother in a duel and thereafter attempts a repentance by becoming a Jesuit priest among the same Guarani Indians he once hunted down captured, and enslaved. His choice of penance is to haul his heavy battle gear around wherever he goes. When the Jesuits go up the waterfalls to visit the Guarani in the highlands, Mendoza hauls his battle gear behind him by way of a long rope wound over his shoulders. At the summit, when, at last, he heaves his battle gear up over the edge of the precipice and joins the others on the summit, he is surrounded

by the Guarani. They recognize him as the hated slave-trader who once hunted them. One of the Guarani speaks quietly to Father Gabirel, portrayed by Jeremy Irons, and then runs over to Mendoza with a knife. You don't know if he is going to cut Mendoza's throat or what. Then he abruptly slashes the rope and shoves the battle gear away from Mendoza's grasp and into the forgiving waters below.

This is a redemption for Mendoza, a release from his pain and sin and waywardness. And he knows it. With a mud-caked, tear-soaked face Mendoza begins heaving and smiling and aching and anguishing, all at the same time. It is a clear sign of redeeming grace that comes to Mendoza from the hearts of grace of the Guarani. Weeping with those who are weeping is a holy task.

Let Us Learn from Our Tears

One final note before I close. We can learn from our tears. Our tears can teach us lessons about ourselves, about life, about others, and about scripture. That is, if we will allow our tears to speak to us.

Just recently I had occasion to have a conversation with some of my tears. They said, "In addition to feeling the hurt you're feeling now, and in addition to knowing a deeper humanness because of us, and in addition to paying close attention to the Beatitudes, we'd like to suggest you read some the Psalms."

"Oh really," I asked, "which ones?"

"Oh, you'll know," they said.

"Aw come on," I protested, " you mean like Psalm 126, 'Those who go out weeping, ... shall come home with shouts of joy....'?"

"That's a good one, but no, not that one," the tears said, "try a little earlier in the Psalms."

"Well, is it Psalm 30 - 'Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning'?"

"Oh that's sweet, for sure," said the tears, "but no, that's not the one we want you to look at."

“Come on, you tears,” I responded with no little agitation, “just tell me where to look!”

“Why don’t you read Psalm 23,” the tears urged.

“There aren’t any tears in the Shepherd’s Psalm!” I exclaimed.

“Don’t be too sure of yourself, mister,” the tears responded with glee, “take a look.”

And so I read the 23rd Psalm, and sure enough, they were right. It was right there in the first few verses: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters, he restoreth my soul....”

“It’s right there, isn’t it?” I inquired of my tears.

“Yes, right there,” they said. “Do you see? That’s us. ‘...still waters...’”

“That’s taking a pretty big slice of poetic license with the text, isn’t it?” I wondered.

“No not really. For sheep, maybe it is a placid pool or a peaceful pond. But for you, your still waters are us, your tears. Not large bodies of water on the ground. Simply us, your tears.”

And then I asked, “And that promise is sure, that part that comes after the part about all of you tears, the still waters? That part about the Lord restoring my soul? That’s trustworthy and true?”

And the tears responded once more, “Oh yes, as true as true can be. You see, it’s by and through and by way of the still waters of tears – and sometimes *only* by way of tears – that God’s promise of restoring can happen. Trust us, it’s true.”

And that’s what I would say to you: Trust the tears, your tears and the tears of others. For it may be, no, it surely is true, that the world is made whole and clear and redeemed because “someone’s crying....”

Whether that someone is you or someone you know or a stranger, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” “The Lord is *our* shepherd, *we* shall not

want. He makes *us* lie down in green pastures, he leads *us* beside the still waters ... *of our tears*. And thereby, not only are we comforted, our very souls are restored.

Again, I love you, and God bless us all. Amen.

NOTES

- 1 See Forrest Church's excellent book *Lifelines: Hold on (And Letting Go)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 42-44, where "tear cups" were first brought to my attention.
- 2 From *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VII (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), p. 279.
- 3 From M. Eugene Boring, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VIII (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), p. 177.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- 5 Genesis 23:2.
- 6 Genesis 33:4.
- 7 Numbers 11:10.
- 8 Judges 14:16.
- 9 I Samuel 1:8.
- 10 II Kings 20:3.
- 11 Job 30:25.
- 12 Ecclesiastes 3:4.
- 13 Jeremiah 13:17.
- 14 John 11:35.
- 15 Luke 19:41-44.
- 16 Romans 12:15.