

“What’s Past Is Prologue”

Scripture

Psalm 137:1-6 *(NRSV)*

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let 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.

Scripture

Mark 2:15-22 *(NRSV)*

Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

Scripture

Matthew 5:4 *(NRSV)*

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Over the last couple of weeks, in hopes of getting across a vision of becoming a blessed church, I have talked about Jesus sitting down with the disciples and a crowd on a mountain hillside, teaching them what it is to be blessed. When he did so, he taught with a different definition of blessing than we might be used to. While he might agree with us that blessings of health and wealth and

happiness are things for which we give thanks to God, his particular definitions of beatitude or blessing invite us into a new way of seeing what is good and hopeful.

Church leader Brian McLaren, whose book *Everything Must Change* is the topic in our adult education class, speaks of the kind of change which Jesus puts before us. It is one inviting us into a new framing story. A framing story is that basic storyline by which we put together the pieces of our lives and world? Here's an example: "We're to fulfill the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves." If this is our most basic approach to life, it is a framing story. "Before anything else, I'm proud to be an American." Or, "Eat, drink and be merry. For today we live and tomorrow we die." Framing stories.

As he begins the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays out a new and different kind of framing story. It's one in which we re-imagine "blessing." As Jesus' defines it, blessing comes to us at the end of our rope. With less of you there is more of God. Blessing comes when "you're content with just who you are - no more, no less." "You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'carefull,' you find yourselves cared for." These blessings depend not so much upon circumstances but the promises and calling of God. So we are asked, what if we viewed our lives and our world through the lenses of this kind of framing story, how would we be different?

Considering the roller coaster week we've seen with the economy, having a new framing story may not be such a bad idea. In fact, becoming a blessed church ought to speak to such broader life contexts. And in the things that shake us, we have a golden opportunity to examine our framing stories. When Jesus speaks of the framework of blessing he not only speaks to us in terms of our own personal spiritualities. There is an invitation, as well, to a new framing of the world in which we live. The framing story of blessing may be calling us to a sustainable economy rather than an economy without constraint where planet and neighbors are used as utilitarian means to a maximized profit. The framing story of blessing may be calling us to the humbleness of being poor in spirit which matches having a spirit of distress about the financial gap not only between rich and poor but even the middle class and poor, this gap demeaning and dehumanizing in ways that do not cohere with Jesus' expression of to blessing.

Actually, the beatitude we are focusing on today sees blessing on those who mourn, discerning that they will be comforted. As much

as this speaks to our personal losses, it speaks as well to what's it like to move from one framing story to another. More specifically, it speaks to the path we walk from that which is to be left behind to the comfort that energizes us for the new to come.

In preparation for the sermon today, I read Randy Pausch's book, *The Last Lecture*, along those lines. He had an example of the blessing of mourning. Pausch, a former computer sciences professor at UVA, spoke of the head feint he would use in instructing students in his virtual reality classes. He had helped a former student of his to find his way into George Lucas' studio, where the former student ended up conceiving some of the elaborate scenes in the latest *Star Wars* movies, including that epic battle which takes place in a huge cave between the young Obi-Wan Kenobi and forces of the emerging Empire in *Star Wars II*. So Pausch would take his class on a tour of the studio, and see their excitement for such virtual work grow exponentially. But it was a head feint, he said in the end, for his real purpose was to have them be competent and committed computer scientists.

The same was true of his book, *The Last Lecture*, Pausch said in the end. Dying of pancreatic cancer, this last tale of his views on life and his values, which got a whole public intrigued and interested in his writings, was also a head feint. He describes his mourning, not as one for himself but one for his children who are losing their father. His head feint is meant to get them to a comfort with him that will help them to live hopefully and abundantly into their own futures.

It is something curious, in fact, that Jesus speaks a blessing for those who mourn. There is hardly any state more devoid of blessing than that of grief, I would say. Yet, amazingly, the grief can link with a new or transformed life.

Psychiatrist Gordon Livingston, author of *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart*, was interviewed on the Kojo Nnamdi radio program not too long ago. His topic was "what makes us happy," to which he put forward a simple threefold answer: we are happy if we have something to do, someone to love and something to look forward to. And then, quite oppositely, the main thing which keeps us unhappy is nostalgia.

Psalm 137 is a heart-breaking lament written out of the experience of loss as Jewish people were taken from their homeland in captivity in Babylon in the sixth century BC. Following the lines that we read, today, the song goes on to relish the idea of vengeance

someday being visited on their captors. I think Jesus would say that these mourners are blessed in their expression of grief, but towards the step-by-step end where they will come to be comforted. And it will take a while. They must name the things they treasure, but in an objectified way, so that they are real beyond nostalgia. Then they will be able to move on to what we hear Jesus pointing to in the Gospel of Mark, with his pithy observation that you cannot put new wine into old wineskins.

I think of things like this as I survey the history of St. Andrew, sometimes. At first, our church's story is that of "the little engine that could," never doubting when others said the project was impossible, always believing that the goals could be made – call a pastor, build a building, foster a mission to the community. But then came tragedies, incidents which brought hurts too deep to talk about both to families in the congregation and the congregation as a whole. And "the little engine that could" transformed into a fellowship, where, as it says in our mission statement: "keenly aware of both the joys and risks in caring for one another, we have willingly chosen to develop a fellowship though which we are no longer strangers, but rather friends in Christ." That fellowship shows a way beyond the mourning to a comfort that is forwarded in rich blessing.

At the entrance of the National Archives Building are the statues of two figures. One, an aged man has a closed book of history resting on his knees, with an inscription underneath – a line attributed to Confucius saying: "study the past." The other is a young woman, who "is lifting her eyes from the empty pages of the open book she holds into the future," with the words of Shakespeare as her caption: "What's past is prologue."

Perhaps this is where we are. The old stories have gotten us to places where powerful lessons can be named and not forgotten. But the blessing is in how these all are prologue to who we are to be now and what our calling may be in a future. So we look back to Jesus speaking a blessing on those who mourn and we hear that the end of that blessing is a comfort which promises life and calling into a future. Jesus blessing on those who mourn leaves us with questions to consider. What are the pieces of nostalgia that we need to name and let go? What blessing might we find in the naming of our past that it might be a prologue to a future held open in a book where the pages have yet to be written?