

## **"The Great Reversal"**

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Isaiah 61: 1-4 and Matthew 5: 1-13

"Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Just like last week, seems a bit strange to pair happy with mourning, but actually, I believe that mourning is precisely the path to happiness. It's those who cannot mourn who often are left in deep depression, unrelenting anger, and a host of other sad places. Perhaps you'll remember that Brene Brown told us last week that happiness is a long term condition, not a short term event. This message today is all about the long run and how it is so important for our long term mental health that we allow ourselves to mourn.

We live in a culture that doesn't allow us to mourn very well. It used to be the case that people got several days off for a death in the family, traffic stopped for passing funeral processions, and almost everyone had a funeral service of some kind. That is more and more not the case anymore. Before I say too much more about it, I feel it necessary to name that I work for a funeral home as well as my position here as pastor. Some might say that I recommend funerals or other

memorial services and gatherings because I stand to gain something financially. I don't believe that to be true, but you're free to come to your own conclusions about the necessity of gatherings at the time of someone's death. The point is not that, but that it is important that somehow, and in some way, we grieve at those times of life where it is necessary and important to our long term health. How you do you that is completely up to you.

Richard Rohr, in his book *Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount* (reissued with a new title: *Jesus' Alternative Plan: The Sermon on the Mount*), relates:

On men's retreats we speak of grief work. There is a therapeutic, healing meaning to tears. Undoubtedly that's true, even as we study what's in tears. We speak of salt in tears but now there is evidence of washed-out toxins. Is not weeping, in fact, necessary? Beyond that, of course, Jesus is describing the state of those who weep, who have something to mourn about. They feel the pain of the world. Jesus is saying that those who can grieve, those who can cry are those who will understand.

The Syrian Fathers Ephraim and Simeon weren't as popular as the Greek Fathers in the early centuries of the Church. The Greek Fathers tended to filter the gospel through the head; the Syrians' theology -- like a lot of present feminist theology--is much more localized in the body. The Syrian Fathers, in effect, wanted tears to be a sacrament in the Church. Saint Ephraim goes so far as to say until you have cried you don't know God. How different!

When I was in seminary, one of my favorite professors, Dr. Tex Sample, used to describe much of Christian theology as "sinus theology", meaning that much of

it happened from the eyebrows up. In other words, we became fascinated in the church (and elsewhere) with everything logical, rational, and ultimately controlled. Maybe that's part of why we apologize so often when we cry. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have lost control like that." Or, "I'm sorry if I've made you uncomfortable, I just can't seem to stop crying." We often tell ourselves we shouldn't, we can't, we must not. And yet rarely, in our culture, do people have the apologies for flying off the handle about whatever made them angry. It's often unresolved sadness that leads to angry outbursts.

Unresolved sadness and over-reliance on purely logical and rational thinking is part of the cause of a number of societal problems. Jesus himself wept at the tomb of Lazarus, and over the city of Jerusalem. What better possible reason for it to be okay for us to weep, when the person we Christians model ourselves after did it himself! In fact, in the United Church of Christ, we only have two sacraments: Holy Communion and Baptism. Our rationale is that these are the things Jesus participated in, and he told us to do so. Well, maybe the Syrian Fathers are right? Jesus participated in weeping. And in today's scripture, he blesses those who mourn. Maybe that's telling us to do it?

I'm not looking to change church sacramental theology, but I am very much

interested in removing the stigma of mourning and sadness. This is not only true when people die, but for a host of other life events too numerous to mention from job loss, to marital separation, to dreams shattered, to...you get the idea.

Father Rohr continues:

We think we know God through ideas. Yet corporeal theology, body theology, says weeping perhaps will allow you to know God much better than ideas. In this Beatitude, Jesus praises the weeping class, those who can enter into solidarity with the pain of the world and not try to extract themselves from it. That is why Jesus says the rich man can't see the Kingdom. The rich one spends life trying to make tears unnecessary, and, ultimately, impossible. Weeping over our sin and the sin of the world is an entirely different mode than self-hatred or hatred of others. The weeping mode, if I can call it that, allows one to carry the dark side, to bear the pain for the world without looking for perpetrators or victims, but instead recognizing the tragic reality that both sides are caught up in. Tears from God are always *for everybody*, for our universal exile from home. "It is Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted..." (Jeremiah 31: 15b).

I have participated in Father Rohr's men's work for many years now, and it has led to the greatest transformation of my life -- far greater than I could have imagined. In fact, it led to the Living School, and continuing on through my trip to New Mexico a couple of weeks ago. His primary message, which has become mine, is that what often seems to be irrational, or counter-intuitive, or scary, is indeed the correct path. Said more succinctly, "the path of transformation is the path of descent." In our culture, we try everything to ascend, to not get rattled (except for anger), and ultimately to stay in control. That is strikingly in contrast to

the message of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount.

The "weeping mode", as Richard described it, "seems ridiculous, and it is especially a stumbling block to men in our culture. To men's groups I say that the young man who cannot cry is a savage; the old man who cannot laugh is a fool." Our culture gives a starkly different message, and I honestly believe that women are getting that message more and more often as our society changes. Now, for many, it's not okay to weep, to mourn, or to otherwise not "keep it together."

Could it be possible that the path to happiness leads directly through the valley of tears, or even as the psalm relates, "the valley of the shadow of death"? I believe so. Transformation of life most certainly occurs through the path of descent. It's a long road that is never quite finished and I recommend that road highly. In the meantime, maybe we can just stop apologizing for our tears? Maybe we can allow ourselves and others to mourn? Maybe we can receive blessing, or happiness, through our toxin-releasing tears? I believe we can. I invite you to take the risk.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Happy are those who have cried buckets of tears, for they shall be transformed by a power greater than themselves.

Amen.