

FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON: Isaiah 61:1-3
SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON: Romans 12:9-18
MEMORY VERSE: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Matthew 5:4

Grace to you and peace from the One who is and who was and who is to come.

It is good to be back with you this morning. Pastor Doug and I enjoyed our time away – it was refreshing and we could rest assured that First Church was in Pastor Don’s good hands.

We have begun a series in which we are looking at the Beatitudes – those teachings of Jesus that have become so familiar to us that, at least for some, they may have lost some of their impact because of their familiarity. Our first lesson looked at what it meant to be blessed when one is poor – either poor in worldly goods or poor in spirit – either circumstance works equally well – God provides for us, even through those dark, dark times we have all experienced.

This morning we will look at a specific type of dark time – those times that cause us to mourn. Some of the reasons for mourning were listed in our prayer of confession – losses are prominent in bringing about mourning – losses of youth, health, loved ones, innocence, and dreams – the list could go on and on. We are not alone in having these feelings. Scripture is filled with stories of people who were mourning some event in their lives. The Psalms contain numerous laments; for example: Psalm 30:11 - You have turned my mourning into dancing; You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.

A few psalms later – Psalm 35:14 - I went about mourning as though for my friend or brother. I bowed my head in grief as though weeping for my mother. Another – Psalm 43:2 - You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?

Mourning, especially at the loss of a loved one, was an important duty in Old Testament times and this obligation was a part of Jewish life when Jesus began his ministry. There were rules about when mourning should begin, when tears were appropriate, and how long such mourning should last. Mourning became

a ritual that almost superseded the feelings of the family. And as often happens with rituals, it became important to identify those who were more important in the community with more ritual – more people, more mourning. This led to a new occupation – that of professional mourner. It became a whole cottage industry – there were ways to cry, poems to be composed – the more important the individual, the longer the poem.

These forms were important to the community because the attitude at the time was that if something went wrong – like someone dying or getting badly injured, or born with some defect – then somehow there was sin involved. These bad things were happening because God was punishing the sinners. One example of this attitude is apparent in the story of Jesus healing a young man who was born blind – the gospel of John, chapter 9 tells the whole story. Jesus and his disciples entered the boy’s village and saw this young man along the side of the street. The disciples – did you hear? – it was Jesus’ disciples who asked this question: "Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?" After healing the young man, Jesus then had to deal with the disbelief first of the neighbors and then that of the local Pharisees. People could not understand how someone could be healed of an affliction and not target those whose sin had caused the affliction in the first place.

Now listen to Jesus’ teaching about mourning in the Beatitudes, it is our memory verse: Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. This turns the usual ideas of mourning upside down. This sort of mourning is that which comes from the heart – from those who care and have a relationship with the one afflicted or who has died. This is NOT the mourning that can be bought and performed as a ritual of show and status. Notice, too, that those who mourn will be comforted – they will NOT be shown the errors of their ways – all the things that must have caused the calamity. There is no punishment in this statement – only comfort and attention from our mighty God.

How can we be comforted? God can reach out to us in a variety of ways. Let me tell you a story – this is a true story and one for which we have permission to name names. At Christ Church in Bethlehem, our home church, we had a close relationship with a couple – Bob and Bobbi Rogers. By the time we knew them, two of their three children were married and over the years we saw their

grandchildren born and growing through toddlerhood, elementary school, and for two of them – high school graduation. We also spent summers with Bob and Bobbi on mission trips as well as weekly worship services. We have kept in distant touch with them since we have come to First Church – exchanging Christmas cards and occasional emails.

About a month ago we heard through a mutual friend that Bob and Bobbi’s oldest granddaughter Lea had died of a heroin overdose. She was 21. Pastor Doug and I were not able to go to Lea’s funeral but we were able to spend some time with them last Sunday. They told us an amazing story of how Lea’s death has affected the family, especially their son – Lea’s father Kerry. Kerry was a bit of a rebel growing up – and often stated his opinion that he was dragged to church as a child and therefore he was not ever going to attend on his own. Kerry was still living at home when Lea was born – her parents had not married.

We first met Lea when she was in early elementary school. She divided her time sometimes living with her mother or her father when he moved into his own place, and also with Bob and Bobbi. She had her ups and downs, her life was sometimes not at stable as would have been best. When Lea was in high school, she became a life guard at one of the swimming pools in Bethlehem. She loved her job and her supervisors loved her. Once she was asked to transfer to a different pool – this was a turning point in her life because the lifeguards at this new pool used drugs – heroin being one of them. They introduced Lea to the drug world and her life was taken over by her need for drugs. She went through several rehabs but none really made the difference she needed. She was never able to overcome this addiction.

During this time Kerry did come back to church, willing to play guitar for the contemporary service. He even began staying for the sermons but not really giving signs that he was happy or blessed to be in worship. When we left Christ Church I felt that Kerry’s faith was still not strong, that he could be pushed away from the church by circumstances. When we heard about Lea’s death, I thought about Kerry and how this awful situation might affect his faith. Might he feel God was punishing him for some past sins he had committed?

I had opportunity to talk with Kerry on Sunday since he was at worship. He seemed calm and at peace. He told me that although Lea’s death was tragic and should not have happened, he had learned so much from her including his strengthened conviction that there is a heavenly afterlife. I gave thanks to God that Kerry had turned toward God in his time of need rather than blaming God for this disaster or seeing Lea’s death as punishment.

Now, like listening to Paul Harvey, here’s the rest of the story which Bobbi told us that afternoon. One of the things Lea was always concerned about was her dad being alone. She never wanted him to be alone. After her death, Kerry was alone, except for a beloved dog named Marley, and on an evening shortly after she died, he felt a strong urge to try to connect with his daughter. He was in his living room where there was a bunch of balloons left over from a family birthday party several weeks earlier. As he sat there thinking of Lea, he asked that if Lea could hear him, could she move the balloons – just a little bit? Nothing happened, not right away, not in the several hours that passed before he went to bed.

During the night Marley, his dog, woke him up and went to the closed bedroom door. Kerry was curious as to what had awakened his dog so he got up and opened his bedroom door, a door that opened into his living room. Right in front of the door, there hung the balloons, those same balloons that hadn’t moved in all the weeks they had been in his living room – nor had they moved the night before. Yet there, right in front of him, were these balloons. Kerry tried to move the balloons the next day – he turned on the AC, turned it off, tried anything he could think of to make these balloons move – nothing could make them budge – yet they had moved to be right in front of his bedroom door after he asked that they move if Lea could hear him.

When I heard this story, it gave me goose bumps. Not only was there a sign that could be interpreted to mean that God heard Kerry’s need for reassurance about Lea and God answered that need by moving the balloons. But also Kerry was looking for a sign – a God sighting – that brought him great comfort in his darkest time.

There is an additional part of the story. Kerry’s brother and sister-in-law, Lea’s uncle and aunt, were scheduled to take a Caribbean cruise shortly after Lea’s

death. These plans were made prior to this awful happening, and they decided to go through with their plans – they felt that getting away would be healing for them. While they were on their cruise, they saw a butterfly each day. Remember they were on a boat in the middle of the ocean, yet there were butterflies around – a different one each day. Somewhat surprising to be sure – but then again maybe not so surprising since Lea loved butterflies. The family saw this as another sign of God’s comforting hand on them during this difficult period.

Bob and Bobbi told us many stories last Sunday afternoon. It was a time of sharing, a time of grieving, a time of healing, a time of comfort, all bathed in God’s love. It was a blessed time for us, and part of the blessedness was the conviction we all felt that God’s love was seen and experienced by all those who were looking for God’s care. God sightings all around.

This is a time to reaffirm our need to remain open and sensitive to those things that are happening all around us that are signs of God’s love, care, and comfort. That is why we encourage you to continue with the God sightings program we began along with reading the Bible through in a year. These two programs can stand alone, but they reinforce each other. When we read God’s word, we become more open to God’s presence in our lives. When we are more open to God’s presence in our lives, we become more aware of the many ways God can speak to us. It may be through something only God can do – like moving balloons in a grieving father’s living room or having butterflies visit a couple on a cruise. It may be through sharing stories, sharing feelings, sharing grief and joy with friends God has provided. Comfort can come in a variety of ways.

It is key to always keep in mind that God does not punish. That is an Old Testament concept of God. Jesus, through his love and willingness to become one of us and then to accept the punishment for sin, even though he was sinless, once for all, died so that we might have eternal life. Jesus taught this, Jesus lived this, Jesus continues to live this. The familiar Beatitude – blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted – becomes new and fresh when we look at the many, many ways God can bring such comfort to us when we are in need. When we are on the lookout, it may be amazing what we see. Just like Kerry, just like Bob and Bobbi, just like each of us. Thanks be to God!