

The Grief That Blesses

Romans 7:21-8:2; James 4:1-10

So the words that began our passage this morning are the same words that ended our passage last week. And as I read them again this week them I was struck by the fact that James is every bit the brother of Jesus. Do me a favor, if you really want to track with me this morning, and turn in your Bibles to Luke's gospel, chapter 6, verse 26, where you will find Jesus saying only a little more gently exactly what James just said to us a few moments ago. Jesus said, "*Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh!*" And we've always heard these words from Jesus as words of comfort.

If we're down now, God will find a way to bear us up. He'll sort out the things that make us weep so that we're comforted, so that we laugh in the end. Which is good news if we're on the wrong side of success and fulfillment and popularity now. But if you keep reading in Luke's gospel, you'll find, just after the Beatitudes, an equally long list of "*Woes...*". So Jesus not only promises comfort to those who mourn, but like his brother James he warns people who think they're made, people who imagine themselves successes and masters and brilliant, that an ugly surprise is waiting for them. Jesus said Luke's gospel, "*Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep!*"

And I think it's interesting that, when pastors like me choose a Call to Worship, we tend to want to read the blessings Jesus promised us, and not include the woes, not to dwell on the warnings Jesus gave about our getting so caught up in momentary happiness and comfort and success that we stop listening to God, stop devoting ourselves to those values and priorities and boundaries and fences God gave us to keep life from becoming all about us, how wonderful and smart and powerful are we. Because the values, the priorities that live in God's heart are alien to us.

So we read this letter from James and wonder "What's eating him? Why is this man always scolding us?" All month James has brought us through this treatise about the dangers of the tongue, how wrong speech, errant thoughts in a bad moment, can set our whole lives aflame, turn the whole course of life spinning in the wrong direction. So concerned was James that he draws pictures, uses words that bring us back to the Garden, to the day of the Fall, to remind us that lies from a Serpent's tongue can wrench us away from God and away from everything God gave us to hold life together.

And it's not just James! Jesus and Paul also taught that even believers, even people like you and me would wrestle our whole lives against what was first spoken, the passions first unleashed when we first listened the lies the Serpent sold us way back in the Garden. So even after we give

our lives to Christ, after we believe his gospel and become God's children, even then, the Serpent's lies, what we'd always been, what we'd always thought and felt continues to lead us astray, even though we belong to God from the moment we believe and open our hearts to Christ. How can that be?

Jesus said in John's gospel, *"All that the Father gives me shall come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never, ever cast out."* So once we belong to him, once we believe in Christ, we are saved and no one can un-save us, we are his and no one can snatch us from his hand, Jesus said in John 10. And yet believers continue to be tempted by lies and waylaid by wants and passions inside us. So bad is it that James addresses the early Christians as *"adulterous people"*!

Again, I ask you, how can this be?. Well, it turns out that there is an order to salvation. There are a series of steps God brings us through to makes us his own. And in our experience, from our point of view, the first step is called regeneration. Regeneration is when God sends his Spirit into our hearts to awaken us to how wrong we've been since the Fall and how wonderful is God and the way of life he offers us. In Ephesians 2, Paul puts it this way he says *"... you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you...walked,"* We were gone, our hearts were closed to God. We weren't even listening! But Paul goes on and says this, *"But God being rich in mercy made us alive together with Christ"*. So regeneration is when God's Spirit brings us alive to hear God's call and believe his gospel. Step one, God brings us alive, and step two, he calls us.

And because his Spirit has made us alive to him, when he calls us, however and wherever we hear the gospel, we believe. And then comes step three, when we believe the good news and are convinced by the Spirit to trust and follow Christ, the Father justifies us. This word "justify" is a legal term. It's not magic, it doesn't really change how we think or feel or act. Justification is when God decides deal with us as belonging to his Son. So God deals with us as if the goodness and holiness and obedience of Jesus actually belongs to us. Even though, we're not really good or holy or obedient yet.

Christ is beloved by the Father, and when we throw in with Christ, we become beloved by the Father. Even though we're not good or holy or obedient at the get go, God declares us righteous because Christ is righteous and we belong to Christ. Which sets the stage for step four, "sanctification".

Because we are beloved for Christ's sake, the Father sends his Spirit to live in our hearts and he begins to bring us up as his children, reteaching us up from down, and right from wrong according to the goodness and beauty and order that has always lived in God's heart. So the word "sanctification" is just a fancy term which means to "set apart". God makes us different from

what we were, and different from the unbelievers all around us. And like any upbringing it can take a long, long, time and it can involve some amount of upset and change and turmoil and grief.

Which brings us back to James writing the ancient believers in congregations like ours and telling them, *“Be wretched and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom!”* Think about it people! Why did Jesus tell us that we are *“Blessed...”* when we *“weep now”* . Why did Jesus warn us that it is *“Woe...”*, bad for us to laugh now? Did Mary bring up a pair of grouches who never wanted anyone to be happy? Of course not! That’s what the Serpent told the woman back in the garden! *“God doesn’t want you to eat from any tree in the garden!”*

God is a good Father. God has always wanted his human children to eat well and to be well and to know joy and be happy. But God knows that the deepest joy, that soundest sense of direction, that peace which passes understanding grows from keeping faith with Someone else, having a purpose more important, having Someone we love more than what we want or think we need at a given moment. God knows that because he is that. In 1 John 4, it says that God is love.

Later this year, we’ll study the doctrine that God knew we would fall and he knew what it would cost him to save us, his own Son’s blood, pain and suffering, grief and tears on earth and even in heaven. And if it took grief and tears to save us, then it follows that weeping and mourning can be a good thing.

Because the key to being happy in a desperately fallen world is to understand that, since we belong to a Father who loves us, the grief we feel, the pain we endure, the tears we shed are never wasted. It is good, blessed, to bear disappointment and heartache, to cry tears and mourn losses without hardening our hearts and settling for something less than faithfulness and sacrifice, service and obedience. There is joy in keeping faith with God. Personally I think Jesus was the happiest man who ever lived.

I think he loved saving and serving and teaching us. I think it thrilled God’s Son to take human flesh and stride out into the desert and show the devil, the Serpent of old, a man who was not going to be tricked or tempted or intimidated away from God. I think Jesus felt real satisfaction in seeing outcasts and underdogs, women and foreigners make their way to God when the high and mighty couldn’t.

And I think all this scolding from James is meant to remind us that we were regenerated, God made us alive. We were called, God taught us to believe. We were justified, God declared us righteous and beloved, and we were sanctified, God sent us his Spirit to set us apart as his own,

not running the table and grabbing what's ours and making the rules and suiting ourselves. All those impulses still live inside us and sometimes they make us "*wretched*", Paul wrote.

But he went on to teach that in Christ, there is a forgiveness and a power that will ultimately free us from our worst selves if we will just grieve what's wrong, shed a few tears and then reach for what's right inside us. "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death.*" In other words, we are justified. We can cause ourselves a lot of grief playing at sin. But if we belong to Christ, we can't make God love us any less. And we are sanctified, Paul said the "*the Spirit of life,*" is in us, so there is power inside us to do different and to be better if we'll only believe it.

So James tells us, "*Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.*" God isn't in heaven, his arms folded, withholding his love and power until we do better. He is like the father in the Prodigal Son, already out the house, already headed our way, robe in hand, ready to cover our sins bring us back home. The trick is for us to believe that he is in our lives, that his Spirit has already clothed us, that we are on our way home, sins and failures and all.

There may be tears to cry, sin to repent, but we are regenerate, alive to God and alive to love. we are justified, beloved, God is for us and with us. And we are sanctified, wearing his Spirit like a robe already, belonging to him if we'll only wake up and head in the right direction. It's a matter of believing in what God has already done and trusting that he will get it done.

Finally James wrote, "*Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.*" The fifth and last thing God will do is glorification.

If we stay at it, if we trust the Father to get us home, there'll be glory for us at a banquet God has set to celebrate what Christ has done, and what we've become because of him.