

Memorial Service Meditation: Matthew 5: 1-12

“Blessed Comfort” by Bishop Peggy A. Johnson

Last year I attended the memorial service for a beloved retired pastor in the conference. There were quite a few people in attendance and it was held at a large church. There were many photographs of the life of the deceased pastor flashed on the screen. Wonderful words were preached and heart-felt testimonies were given. Then, right in the middle of it all, there was an unexpected surprise. Two clowns broke into the service. They were Christian clowns, dressed in colorful costumes and they carried on a wonderful dialog about the life of this pastor. It was a fitting addition to the service as the deceased was a person that was full of fun and loved clown ministry. I remember that one moment before people realized this was a joyful interruption into the service. Sitting in the front I could see the audience and a look of shock came across many faces. Then that shock turned to smiles and a ripple of good natured laughter.

Perhaps when Jesus spoke the words: “blessed are those who mourn” there was the same shock in the minds of the listeners. And then Jesus went on to say: “for they shall be comforted.”

“Blessed” means “happy.” The death of a loved one can hardly be called a “happy” or “fortunate” thing. In fact all of the Beatitudes of Matthew 5:1-12 are as strange as clowns at a funeral. Jesus says you should be happy if you are poor in spirit, happy if you hunger and thirst, happy if you are persecuted. This word “happy” is not the kind of happy that you get from watching a funny movie or eating a good meal. It is a deep abiding joy that is devoid of circumstances but dependent on an invisible, untouchable faith thing that transcends subjective emotions.

Jesus’ kingdom was the upside-down world of God’s kingdom where the least are the greatest, the leader is the servant, women and tax collectors get into heaven ahead of Pharisees and holy teachers and yes, people who are mourning are blessed.

Today we come to honor with profound respect, the lives and ministries of our beloved pastors, spouses, bishops, and lay leaders who have joined the church triumphant. Surrounded by the friends and members of this conference family we say “thank you” for your loved one, thank you for the ministry you shared with them and we say: “receive the promised comfort of God.” Jesus said these words and it is a sure thing. How do we experience this blessed comfort?

First, we do so by supporting one another. The word “comfort” in Latin, literally means “together (con) strong (fortis).” We are a gift to each other during times of loss and grief. We have all experienced grief and that knowledge and empathy gives us tools for comforting one another.

The story is told of a buddha who was approached by a woman who asked him to restore the life of her son. He told her to take a bowl and collect a pepper corn from every family that had not known death or grief. If she could bring back a bowl of peppercorns her son would be restored to her. She set off on

the task and went to each home asking if they had experienced death and grief. By the end of the day her bowl was empty. Every home had been touched by sorrow. She was not alone in her suffering. The stories of each home's sadness and the sympathy they offered her gave her comfort during her time of grief.

Be "together strong" for each other in real and personal ways. We know that God is with us but we need a personal touch. The little boy was awakened by a loud thunderstorm in the middle of the night. Frightened by the storm the boy cried out to his father. His father called back to him from his bedroom: "don't be afraid, son, God is with you." The boy said "I know that but I want someone in here with skin on." You can be the person with "skin on" that provides support and comfort and in the experience you yourself are comforted.

A second way to find comfort is to live the legacy of the person who has gone to heaven. Several weeks ago I was invited to attend the birthday celebration of my piano teacher, who was 91 years old. I studied with her 40 years ago. It was an intimate gathering of many students, old and young, who came to pay tribute to this great teacher and concert pianist. After she performed and received a large bouquet of flowers she said "Don't forget the things I have taught you. I don't have many years left but you do. So keep music alive in your worlds and spread it to others."

Likewise we should take the example of the well-lived life of our loved ones and carry on the traditions, passions and ministries that blessed this world. I know a pastor whose father passed away. He was a beloved pastor in this conference. He was known for his cooking skills and his famous recipe for homemade fudge. After his death that recipe was shared with many as a reminder of this pastor's hobby.

As we participate in the ministries of our loved ones we also honor them and are comforted. Jesus said to Peter as he was considering his legacy: "do you love me?" and Peter said "yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus replied, "feed my sheep." There are plenty of sheep out there that you could be loving on behalf of your precious family member in their memory.

Finally we find comfort as we keep our eye focused on heaven. What could be more comforting than the assurance, the blessed assurance that your loved one is with the Lord? Recently I talked with a clergy whose mother had died. She died from a painful disease and had lingered for some time before she passed. The pastor told me that the death had been a release, a victory, a promise kept because she knows her mother is with the Lord. That is our true joy and comfort.

God's Spirit is ever near to tell us this promise. Jesus said "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live." This life is truly a "passing through," a breath, a few years. But the life to come is everlasting and there we will know joy, and peace and no more sickness, crying or death.

Take the blessed promise of comfort with you. Be of support to one another, live the legacy of your loved one and trust that heaven is a sure and certain reality for them and for you. And may the peace of God be with you all.