

November 6, 2022 – Matthew 5:1-12

There are times I love being on Facebook. I love, for example, how easy it is to reconnect with friends on Facebook. Just the other day, for example, I talked with one of my best friends from seminary. He was a groomsman in our wedding. We lost touch after seminary, but he had recently reappeared on Facebook. And so we had a wonderful chat, catching up on all the things that had happened in our lives over the past 13 years. Facebook is great for that sort of thing.

But there are other aspects of Facebook that I simply despise. I can't stand how Facebook creates a sense of consequence-free anonymity. Where you can say the meanest, most hateful things to another person without ever looking them in the eye.

I can't stand how Facebook creates false-community. Where if there's someone you don't like, you can simply unfollow or unfriend them and cut them out of your life with the click of a button. For all of human history, communities were groups of very different people with very different opinions who learned how to live together. But now? Now we can curate our own little echo chambers, filled with people who are just like us.

But maybe most of all, as a pastor, I hate how people comfort each other on Facebook. Or on any social media, for that matter. And I know that may sound a little odd, but hear me out.

In the beatitudes today, Jesus says something interesting, *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”* Now, the beatitudes are full of these types of statements. Statements of blessing for people who don't seem to be blessed at all.

But this one caught my eye. It caught my eye because everybody mourns at some point in their life. You can't make it out of this life without mourning the death of someone close to you. This is true of everyone. Rich and poor. Powerful and weak. Christian and atheist. We all mourn someone eventually.

So when Jesus says, *“Blessed are those who mourn,”* is he really talking about the whole earth? All of humanity? I don't think so. Because this list of blessings is very much directed to his disciples. To those who have joined him to hear this sermon on the mount. He wouldn't end this passage by talking about those who will be persecuted for his sake if they weren't the specific people he had in mind all the way through.

Which means when he says, *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,”* he means, “Blessed are you, my disciples, when you mourn, for you shall be comforted.” Comforted in a way that the world doesn't get to be comforted.

And now we get back to Facebook and social media. Because social media is a place where people seek out comfort. Comfort from those communities that they have gathered around themselves. But what I see so often is that the comfort they receive from those communities is very rarely Christian comfort. It's very rarely the comfort that Jesus offers to us in the beatitudes.

No, the truth is that when you look at the comfort of the world on Facebook, it looks really very similar to the comfort that pagan philosophers offered two thousand years ago. The comfort of the world really hasn't changed at all over the course of human history. Because there aren't that many places to find comfort in the midst of grief apart from Christ. Let me give you a few examples.

Bad things happen in this world. I know that. You know that. Everybody knows that bad things happen. And there's nothing you can do about it. How do you give comfort when something bad happens?

Well, the world gives comfort by chalking it up to bad luck. To chance. To fate. The world looks at random, senseless suffering and says, “That happens... but maybe tomorrow will be better.” Because if everything is random, then you've got a 50/50 chance that tomorrow will be better than today.

It's comfort according to Annie. The sun'll come out tomorrow. Sure, today is cloudy, but that just means that there's a better chance that tomorrow will be sunny. Sure, you're going through bad things now. But it can't go on forever, can it? This is the comfort of the world. But it's not comforting at all.

Of course, maybe this suffering is a good thing. And this is where we get into a second kind of worldly comfort. I call it, comfort according to Kelly Clarkson. But, really, she didn't come up with it. Because it's actually comfort according to Nietzsche.

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. That's what Nietzsche taught. Because Friedrich Nietzsche had no god. "God is dead and I have killed him," he famously once wrote. So if we're going to face a world of suffering, then we better become a lot stronger. And every moment of suffering needs to become an exercise in moral fortitude. Because it's not going to get any better.

Except that some people deserve to suffer. Not us, of course. But some people, out there. They deserve what they get. And this is where we get comfort according to karma. Or, as Christians, we might say, comfort according to Job's friends. If you're suffering, then you probably deserve it. It's just karma. It's the universe finding balance.

Now, I think we all know that karma isn't really comforting to those who are suffering. It's comforting for everyone else, though. It makes us feel like there's an order to the universe. Like if we're perfect. If we do everything right. If we are just really, really good people, then maybe we can avoid suffering. Maybe we don't have to mourn.

Because, according to the world, when someone dies, they're gone. And the most we can hope for in death is that somebody will remember us. This is comfort according to George Eliot. "Our dead are never dead to us, until we have forgotten them." Or, as Doctor McCoy once said in Star Trek, "He's not really dead. As long as we remember him."

That's what the world calls comfort. A memory. A fading memory, that won't last. Because someday, you will be forgotten. Someday, the friend you loved will be forgotten. Someday, you won't even be a memory. And so the comfort of this world is as fleeting as the lives of men.

This is the comfort I see on Facebook. And it is so very sad. It's so very empty. I don't want you hearing that kind of comfort when you're suffering, when you're mourning. Because there is no blessing in that comfort. "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*" There is a blessing waiting for you in the midst of your mourning.

It's the blessing of knowing that the fate of this world is not a matter of chance. That suffering may be inevitable, but it has an end. That Christ will return and this age of darkness and suffering will give way to an age of light and life. And so we don't just sing, "The sun'll come out tomorrow," but instead, "The Son will return tomorrow and make all things new."

It's the blessing of knowing that we do become stronger in this midst of suffering. But it's not a strength of will or moral fortitude because there's no where else to turn. No, it's a strength of faith. Faith that God has not abandoned. That we can endure all things, all trials and temptations, through Him who loves us and gave his life for us. What did kill Him makes us stronger, because we put our faith in His power over sin, death, and the devil.

It's the blessing of knowing that this world isn't controlled by karma and legalism won't spare us from suffering. That all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and all are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. And so in the midst of sins and failures, we don't dread the fate of an unfeeling karmic force. But rather, we turn to the one who hears our repentant cries and forgives. Just as we look in mercy upon those around us who sin against us and forgive them as well.

It's the blessing of this All Saints Day. When we gather together and remember those among us who have died in the faith. Knowing that they are alive not because we remembered them, but because God remembered them. Because God said in their baptismal waters, "You are my son whom I love. With you I am well pleased."

He remembers them. He remembers us. And so death is no longer a thing we fear. A thing we dread. A thing that fills us with mourning. For the world, death is empty and meaningless.

But for us, death is a source of comfort. Because those who died in the faith now rest from their labors. Those who died in the faith now stand before God's throne as saints in light. Those who died in the faith suffer no more. For their shepherd stands among them. Guiding them to springs of living water. And wiping every tear from their eyes.

Social media is full of the empty comforts of this world. But here, gathered before God's altar. Gathered to receive our Savior's Body and Blood. We find true comfort. The comfort that can only come from being the children – the saints – of a living God. Amen.