

Dr. Michael B. Brown

Blessed Mourners

SERMON VOL. 03/11

MARBLE VISION

Media Ministries of
Marble Collegiate Church



Dear Friend,

From time to time we all experience challenges and set-backs in life. There are steep climbs and frightening descents. And no one is immune. As the old Lynn Anderson song reminded us, we really were never promised a rose garden.

However, our Faith says that God can use bad times to bring rich blessings. The theological word for that is "redemption." The cliché is about turning lemons into lemonades. The simple fact is that ours is a God of surprise endings, One who can move into our moments of pain and bring forth from them experiences of strength and grace. That's what this sermon seeks to get at. May it be so for you.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael B. Brown". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the name.

Dr. Michael B. Brown, Minister

Blessed Mourners

“Blessed are those who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.”

- *Matthew 5: 4*

“Those who sow with tears shall reap
with joy. They go out and weep and
carry noble seeds and come with joy
and bring their sheaves.”

- *Psalms 126: 5-6*

For those of us who feel that winter has been a whirlwind, and that just a couple of weeks ago we cleaned up after Santa, and maybe just a few days ago we ate Valentine's chocolates, let me confirm for you: *Tempus Fugit!* We are beginning now the journey of Lent. We're just a few Sundays from Easter (and bright ties and sun dresses and bonnets and parades).

But, prior to Easter there is the journey: Lent. This is a season that juxtaposes themes that seem polemically opposite: sadness/joy, guilt/forgiveness, betrayal/loyalty, death/life. And if you listened closely to our morning lesson, you heard those opposites eloquently articulated by the author of *Psalms 126*. That passage from Hebrew scripture marries that which, at first, seems irreconcilable. Happiness *and* grief - joy *and* sorrow - laughter and tears. Most of us, I suspect, would be quick to agree that we know a lot about the latter: grief, sorrow and tears.

Charles Schultz gave so much to the world across several decades. I don't suppose any cartoon strip ever touched as many people as *Peanuts*. Snoopy and Woodstock, Linus and Peppermint Patty. And, of course, Lucy and Charlie Brown. You remember how Lucy used to have a psychiatrist's booth where she would solve all your problems for a nickel. One time Charlie Brown had come to see her there, and she began to philosophize about the approaches we take to life. "Charlie Brown," she said, "life is like a great ocean liner, and we are all sitting in deck chairs. Some people arrange their chair to face the horizon, determined to see and seize what lies ahead. Some people turn their chair toward the rear of the ship, content to focus on where they've been. Some people arrange their chair to face just the ship itself, focusing simply on what exists at the moment. Which way are you facing, Charlie Brown?" He sighed deeply and answered: "Lucy, I don't even know how to get my deck chair unfolded!"

That's where some of us do our living, isn't it? In pain, confusion, despair, or emptiness... not even knowing how to unfold our deck chairs.

Jesus knew about that. Recently we studied His *Sermon on the Mount*. In that sermon He began by speaking of "*those who mourn...*" Well, if you live long enough, "*those who mourn*" means "all of us" because sooner or later we all suffer losses. We all know about mourning.

Obviously the first thing that comes to mind is the loss of a loved one. But there are also other losses that we grieve. I was talking with a friend from out of state this week, and she told me of the dissolution of her marriage after three kids and more than twenty years. The words she used were: "For the last few years of our marriage, I was dead inside." Some of you have lost jobs or income or a certain measure of physical health. Some have seen relationships die. Some have lost a sense of ego or hope. In each of those cases, we grieve because something precious has died. A friend was telling me this week about a minister's family that moved from one church to another during the summer before his daughter's senior year in high school. The girl sank into a deep depression. Her grades suffered. She lost weight. She bounced back and forth between insomnia and sleeping all the time. She was a seventeen year old child who had said difficult good-byes she didn't want to say - to her friends, her school, her church, her home. She was suffering from grief. Mourning.

The people of Israel grieved the loss of their homeland when taken into exile by the Babylonians. Forced from their homes and led off as captives to a foreign land, Psalm 126 described them as "*Those who go out weeping...*" And surely they must have. They had been faithful to God. They had worshiped and served. They had believed that they were God's "*chosen people.*" And this just didn't seem fair. Suffering never does.

James Baker, the Pulitzer prize-winning columnist, wrote of the death of his father. James was just a boy when his daddy died. His father, who succumbed while in a diabetic coma, was only thirty-three. Baker wrote of being shuffled off to the house of Bessie Scott (a local church woman, a saintly lady who loved God and loved children). She said to him: "God loves us all just like his own children." Little James answered: "If God loves me, then why did he let my daddy die?" Listen to the words Baker wrote: "Bessie said I would understand some day, but she was only partly right... That day I decided that God was not entirely to be trusted."

The people of Israel must have felt that way. From time to time, we all feel that way, I suppose. We live the best we can. We try to do good rather than harm. We suffer ourselves rather than to hurt someone else. And then the house of cards falls in around us, and it doesn't seem fair. We know about "*sowing in tears*," as the psalmist put it. We know what it means to struggle and mourn.

But *Psalms* 126 doesn't end with suffering. Instead, it ends with surprise, with serendipity. "*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.*" In other words: "Pinch me. I must be dreaming. This is too good to be true!" Israel was restored. The exiles were returned home. And the Psalm says: "*Those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who went out weeping... came home with gladness.*" They hadn't expected that, but sometimes God writes surprise endings to our stories.



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- | | |
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| 11:00am | Worship Service |
| 12:15pm | Talkback with Dr. Michael Brown |
| 12:45pm | Replay of Bible Study |
| 1:30pm | Adult Education/Spiritual Growth Hour |

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Recently I read John Connolly's book *Every Dead Thing*. I do not, by the way, recommend it. It's a terribly dark book. But there are unexpected twists that surely keep the reader's interest. In the end, the FBI agent who was hunting for the serial killer turned out, in fact, to be the serial killer. It was, to be sure, a surprise ending. If you've seen *Black Swan*, the conclusion was certainly a surprise. At least, I didn't see it coming. Or, for those who prefer a happier sort of surprise ending, think of Gene Tierney in *Laura* and how convinced you are she is dead until the very end when she walks in, very much alive. Or, *South Pacific* where Nellie grieves her lost love, Emile. As she sits with his children, determined to take them on as her own and broken-hearted that he was lost in war, Emile walks in, alive and in love with Nellie. It's part of what we enjoy about mysteries or thrillers, romance stories or even comedies. Surprise endings energize the reader.

The return from exile was, to be sure, a surprise ending. They had been taken from their land "*in weeping*," fearing that they would never see Israel again. But at last they "*came home with gladness*."

Sometimes our experiences of suffering have surprise endings. In fact sometimes, as odd as it sounds, it is from our suffering that our greatest gladness is born.

Tim Brown, the Presbyterian minister and writer, tells of visiting in the hospital room

of an elderly woman named Edith. It was her last day of life. Tim Brown knew that, and so did Edith. So when he asked her: "How are you doing?," they both knew the seriousness of the question. He said their eyes locked, and she answered: "I have never known such pain, or such joy!"

Sometimes from our suffering our greatest gladness is born. The loss of a job opens the door for the birth of a new and better career. The loss of a marriage makes it possible to experience new and unparalleled love. The temporary loss of health provides the impetus for new regimens of diet and exercise that actually lengthen your life. The experience of death gives birth to Life Eternal. "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*" Surprise endings. From pain to joy - from tears to laughter.

Back in the days when Calvin Coolidge was President, he once invited some home town friends to dine in the White House. They were honored but nervous. They weren't sure their social skills were exactly White House-worthy. So they hit on a plan. They would observe Coolidge at the dinner table and simply do everything he did. The strategy worked well until coffee was served. Coolidge proceeded to pour his into his saucer. It seemed odd, but the guests followed suit, pouring their coffee into their saucers, too. Then the President added cream and sugar, so they did, as well. Then Coolidge bent over and put the saucer on the floor for his cat. A surprise ending - at last with laughter.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” “They will sow in tears but reap in shouts of joy... They will go out weeping, but will return in gladness.”

There’s an old fable about a king who had a large and cumbersome stone placed in the middle of a roadway. Then he hid himself amid some trees and watched to see if anyone would care enough about other travelers to move the stone. All day he watched while people hiked around or crawled over the rock. Finally, late in the day, a peasant man came by, carrying a load of vegetables. He saw the stone, put his pauper’s bag on the ground and began to rock the stone from side to side. For a long, long time he worked and pushed and shoved and sweated until little by little, inch by inch, he had moved the obstacle from the road so that other travelers would not be blocked. As the peasant picked up his bag, he noticed that a bag lay in the road where the stone had been. Opening it, he found a fortune of gold coins and a note from the king saying that he had hidden the gold for the person who removed the obstacle from the path.

I don’t know what heavy stones, what obstacles lie in your path. But I do know this: Sometimes beneath the obstacles we find blessings. Sometimes beneath the pains and problems of life we find happiness and hope that we couldn’t have known otherwise. As the old song puts it, often the night really is darkest just before the dawn. That’s the message of Lent, the message of betrayals and

denials and crosses that lead to resurrection. That's the message of the Psalm. People who "*sow in tears often reap in shouts of joy... They go out weeping, but return in gladness.*" That's the message for you and me and everyone who hurts in any way. We don't know the whole story of our life yet. And no matter how bleak our stories may appear, God writes surprise endings... so that in time frowns give way to smiles, tears to laughter, heartache to happiness, and we find ourselves saying with Jesus:

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Prayer:

Loving God, when we find ourselves in the wilderness, may You find us, too, and lead us to a place that feels like home. When we struggle, give us strength. When we weep, give us comfort. When we tremble, give us courage. When we doubt, give us faith. When we tire, give us energy. And when we are about to give up, surprise us with blessings we had not anticipated. All this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

MARBLEVISION

Media Ministries of Marble Collegiate Church

Dr. Michael B. Brown is the minister of New York City's historic Marble Collegiate Church. This publication is an edited sermon, originally delivered by Dr. Brown from the pulpit. We believe you will find his message one of encouragement and challenge for growth in your daily life.

The Collegiate Church, a Reformed Church in America founded in 1628, is the oldest Protestant congregation with a continuing ministry in North America. Marble Church is located on Fifth Avenue and West Twenty-Ninth Street, a few blocks south of the Empire State Building in New York City.

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