

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (January 28-29, 2017)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

I could not breathe. I was crying so hard that I could not breathe. That's scary.

It was the spring of 2001. My friend and mentor, Msgr. Charles Kelly, had died of cancer. Bishop Sullivan asked me to handle many of the details of Msgr. Kelly's funeral.

For the next few days, I was focused on planning the liturgies. I had so many details to take care of – it kept my mind occupied. I wasn't ready to deal with my grief or mourn this loss.

After the funeral Mass we went to Mount Calvary for the burial. And then... it was over. There were no more decisions I had to make. Now what do I do?

So I turned toward the gentleman standing next to me. He gave me a hug – and I started to weep (and I have chosen that word carefully. I was not *crying*. I was *weeping*). I couldn't breathe. He just kept hugging me.

There have been other times in my life when I have mourned so strongly that I couldn't breathe. When my friend Beth died of cancer when she was in her 20's. When my mother died. Most of us have had moments when we were so overwhelmed by grief, that our mourning literally took our breath away.

I sometimes wonder: in 2001, when I was weeping at Msgr. Kelly's grave, what would I have done if someone walked up to me and said, "Blessed are you when you mourn..." I think I would have slapped the smile off their face!

Blessed are you when you *mourn*? Mourning doesn't feel like a blessing. It stinks! It hurts! Blessed? Are you crazy?

And yet... that is precisely what Jesus says, as he sits there on that grass-covered hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. There is Jesus – in one of the most beautiful spots on earth.

Jesus sits down, surrounded by a group of folks who make their living fishing, farming, tending sheep, trying to survive. Some have money, some don't. Some are married, some have buried spouses, and children. Some have strong faith, some struggle with faith.

It's a beautiful setting. And as Jesus preaches what we call his "Sermon on the Mount," he says some beautiful things:

"Blessed are the peacemakers." In an angry world, yes, I get it. Peacemakers are blessed. We need more of them. Blessed peacemakers. Blessed peace.

Beautiful.

Jesus says, “Blessed are the clean of heart.” I get that too. In a world where our language has become dirty and our song lyrics have become dirty and the internet is full of filth... yes. Blessed are the *clean* of heart.

Beautiful.

“Blessed are the merciful.” Yes. In a world so lacking in forgiveness; in a world where we’ve forgotten how to respect each other even if we disagree with someone’s ideas; in a world where family members won’t speak to one another based on the last election... blessed are the merciful. Blessed mercy.

Beautiful.

But in that beautiful setting, Jesus also says, “Blessed are they who *mourn*.” I’m not sure I want to hear that. When I was weeping at the grave of Msgr. Kelly, I didn’t *feel* blessed. I felt *lost*.

When I stood at my mother’s grave, I didn’t feel blessed. I felt orphaned and angry.

A few years ago, I visited the Mount of the Beatitudes in Galilee. And I was thinking about my confusion. How is it a *blessing* to *mourn*? How are we blessed when we are persecuted? How are we blessed when we are poor (as Luke puts it) or ‘poor in spirit’ (as Matthew has it)?

As I prayed about my confusion, the priest who was celebrating Mass for our group started to preach. And he said:

“Blessed are you when you mourn...” Because it means that you have had the opportunity to love someone so much that their death breaks your heart. The only way to avoid mourning is to shut your heart down and never love anyone.

So *blessed* are you when you mourn – because your tears prove that God gave you the opportunity to love someone so much that their death takes your breath away.

Hmmm... ‘the only way *not* to mourn is to shut your heart down and never love someone.’ What kind of life would *that* be? That kind of loveless life would be cold and empty. Definitely not blessed.

My tears of mourning reveal the blessing a life enriched by the kind of love that makes us vulnerable.

I’m *starting* to get it.

Jesus said: ‘Blessed are you when you are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.’ Persecuted? But the priest said, “There is only one way to avoid persecution in life. And that is to never stand for anything.

The way to avoid persecution is to compromise every one of your beliefs, so that you can just keep your head down and get along.

But blessed are you when you believe is something so much that you are willing to speak the truth boldly and pay the price for what is right. Because you actually stand for your convictions. Blessed are you!”

I’m starting to get it.

Jesus said, “Blessed are you poor in spirit.” The priest explained that in Greek this means, “Blessed are those who know that they cannot save themselves. Blessed are those who know that neither money nor power will save me from suffering and death. Blessed are those who understand that we need God’s mercy more than we need anything else in life.

Blessed are those who understand that I am not made happy by what I possess. Blessed are those who understand that, without God, I am nothing. And if I *am* ‘something,’ it’s because God loved me enough to send his son to die on the cross for me.”

True – it is uncomfortable to confess my own powerlessness. But the alternative is to become the kind of arrogant, self-centered, money-driven person our culture wants us to be... people who think that we’ve ‘got it all under control’ and that we are the masters of our destiny.

But that all comes tumbling down. Blessed are you who are poor in spirit, who confess how much you need God for everything.

I’m beginning to get it.

Blessed are you when you are attacked because of your willingness to follow Jesus and take his word seriously.

Blessed are you when you pay a price because the Gospel really is the center of your life. So you feed the poor – because Jesus said so. And it makes others mad or uncomfortable. You visit the sick. Because Jesus said so.

You declare the sanctity of life, whether it’s the person in the womb, or on death row, or in a nursing home, or bearing the face of a stranger – and you make other people mad.

You stand for truth and justice, because Jesus said so. You talk **TO** people rather than talking **ABOUT** people, because Jesus said so.

You love your enemy (at least you *try*), you pray for those you’re struggling with, because Jesus said so. And in doing that, you make others mad, or uncomfortable, and they lash out at you.

But what's the alternative? The alternative is to reduce Jesus to a picture on your wall, who never really guides your life. But blessed are you when you insist that Jesus *is* your life, and you are going to live the way he tells you to. Even when that brings a price. Blessed are you.

I'm beginning to get it.

I used to think the Beatitudes are all about the *future*... as if Jesus is saying, "Put up with a lot of junk now, and you'll have the best seats in heaven."

But I've come to believe that the Beatitudes are also a description of the kind of life Jesus wants us to live *right now*.

They describe of a life that is *worth living*. They are the antidote for the kind of meaningless, self-centered, angry and arrogant life that is being sold to us and to our children by a culture that has become untethered from the Truth.

So...

Blessed are you when you love so much that you can have your heart broken. Blessed are you when you actually stand for something.

Blessed are you when you work for peace.

Blessed are you when you are focused on what is pure, and right.

Blessed are you when you give and receive mercy.

Blessed are you when you take the risk to live the Gospel.

Blessed are you when you live a life that looks more and more like Jesus.

Blessed indeed.

I'm beginning to get it.