

January 29, Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (Matthew 5:1-12)

I don't like this. When I mourn I want to not mourn anymore.

by [T. Denise Anderson](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue

While I love Jesus, I can't guarantee that if I lived in first-century Palestine, I would like him. Let me explain why. Most of us tend to prefer people who are predictable. We like the person we know we can count on for a well-timed joke. We like the person who will show up when they commit to something.

We tend to prefer people we can read; either they tell us outright what they're thinking or their expressions do. We like it when people say what they mean and mean what they say.

We tend to prefer people who are logical and draw understandable conclusions. Basically, we like people we can easily peg.

Jesus was not one of those people. He was not predictable. He was not easy to read. He wasn't always logical, at least not by the norms of his culture. He was enigmatic.

Everything about him was a puzzle. His birth to a virgin, his hometown, and most certainly his teachings were all confounding and defied conventional wisdom.

Matthew's anthology of Jesus' teachings, collectively known as the Sermon on the Mount, begins with the Beatitudes, a litany pronouncing blessings upon what are apparently the lowliest of people. The poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, and those with the arduous task of peacemaking—all are blessed. Here Jesus shows himself to be not only enigmatic but also countercultural.

In a culture that celebrated wealth and military might, Jesus lifted up those on the opposite end of that spectrum as blessed. And they were blessed, but not because they were particularly happy or esteemed, and certainly not because they were without troubles. They were blessed because in a unique and profound way God was near to them. God comforts the mourner, therefore she is blessed. The peacemaker

is a child of God, therefore he is blessed. God's kingdom belonged to all of them.

I don't like this. When I mourn I want to not mourn anymore. I want my tears to give way to smiles and good times. I want whatever I lost to be returned to me so that I no longer have to mourn its loss. If I had my druthers, the proper response to the presence of mourning would be to see it to the door. I don't want it.

Perhaps that's why I respond to a weeping friend with "Don't cry!"

I'm partial to the kind of prosperity that ensures that I don't have to cry. And I'm not alone. We associate comfort and prosperity with God's blessings. For a Jewish community whose scriptures record the promise of blessings for an obedient Israel, including fertility of land and body, comfort equals blessings. For Jesus to turn that idea on its head is just plain confounding. It's also hard to swallow.

This past summer I presided over my denomination's General Assembly when we adopted the Confession of Belhar. The confession rose out of apartheid-era South Africa, and among its most elegant assertions is that "God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged."

God is the God of the destitute. God is the God of the poor. God is the God of the wronged. That portion of the confession is, as far as I can tell, one of the best expositions of the Beatitudes in existence. It says that God is not necessarily impressed with the impressive. God does not necessarily feel privileged to be among the privileged. The blessed ones are the ones who are often unimpressive. The blessed ones are those who are often overlooked by the privileged.

I celebrate a God who is not daunted by our lowliness.

As lost as we feel when we mourn, we are no farther from God than when things were more enjoyable. In fact, might God be even closer in those times? Might the blessing be that God is not put off with us when we are at our worst? Might the blessing be to have a God that doesn't rush our grief but lets us weep? Aren't we blessed to have a God who doesn't tell us not to cry but says instead, "I'm here"?

I celebrate a God who is not daunted by our lowliness, but puts on that lowliness personally. This God is born to a teenage commoner from royal stock but with no royal trappings. This God takes up the work of a craftsman, with all its calluses, hard days, and bodily strains. This God is among us healing the untouchable, supping

with sinners, and teaching the masses. This God is not afraid of messiness or high maintenance. This God dwells right with us in the midst of our brokenness, undaunted by our lack of polish. And because this God dares to draw near to us, we are counted as “blessed.”

I like that.