

“The Soul’s Virtues: Compassion”  
Matthew 5:4

My first full experience of mourning was when I was about 8 years old, after one of my teenage cousins died in a hunting accident. This was in the small mountain village where my father grew up, a place we spent our summers to escape the heat of Damascus, Syria. I was shocked by the public display of feelings at the funeral. People were wailing, screaming, beating their chests, falling to the ground, and tearing their clothes. My only experiences with public grief before that day were in the city, where people were somber, but there was no such outward display of mourning. I couldn't understand how grown-ups weren't embarrassed to show their feelings that way. As an adult, I now understand that the villagers were keeping old traditions of mourning that were much closer to those practiced during the time of Jesus.

At the time of Jesus, mourning was a communal activity. People didn't shy away from sharing their pain, in whatever way it came to them. Grieving together and showing up for one another's pain was a shared social value. However, the people of Jesus lived in the shadow of the mighty Roman Empire, where the imperial agenda shaped cultural perspectives. In their eyes, those who were blessed weren't the ones who had lost loved ones. Instead, the ones who were blessed were seen as those who triumphed in battle or had enough material resources to afford medical care or good nutrition. To the Romans, being "blessed" meant you had "made it" in life and didn't have to worry about losing a loved one.

By encouraging people to know that God was blessing them in the midst of their loss and grief, Jesus directly challenged the imperial perspective on grief and blessing. He emphasized the value of **communal and divine compassion** and support for those who had experienced loss. There was nothing to be ashamed of or to hide from public view. Mourning, Jesus showed, was a path to a greater awareness of God's blessing and the blessing of a caring community.

Jesus himself wasn't afraid to express his grief:

- When his friend Lazarus died, “Jesus wept” (John 11:35).
- When his cousin John was executed, Jesus took time to grieve (Matthew 14:13).
- Jesus lamented over the city of Jerusalem and the human cruelty committed there (Luke 13:34).
- When facing his own execution, Jesus’ own sweat became like drops of blood (Luke 22:44).

Jesus was part of a long prophetic tradition of lament, especially in the face of human atrocities or loss. In fact, the prophets believed that public lament was the first step toward greater faithfulness to God when people lost their way.

Lament and grief help us reconnect to **compassion** for ourselves and for others. The source of compassion in our souls is God. When we allow a sacred space for grief, we allow God, through our souls, to embrace our pain and mend our sense of disconnection. We may know in our minds that our loved ones are still connected to us in the "cloud of witnesses," but unless we allow space for that connection to be felt deep in our souls, we'll remain feeling disconnected.

Consider how our culture struggles with grief, both individually and collectively. We imagine that being spiritually mature means we don't let life get to us by shielding ourselves from the emotions of grief. We move from one tragedy to another without adequately mourning because of our fear of looking weak or fragile. We forget how essential mourning is for compassion and for our healing.

Today, I invite you to embrace Jesus' teaching about mourning as an important and blessed part of our human experience. Psalm 56:8, which says the One who grieves with us puts all of our tears in a vial, reminds us that our pain is not forgotten. As M. Scott Peck, the American psychiatrist and spiritual writer, suggests, the source of all our psychological suffering is trying to avoid legitimate and unavoidable pain.

A powerful example of this comes from the late Presbyterian writer and poet Ann Weems. When her 21-year-old son, Todd, died suddenly, Ann felt as if the stars had fallen from her sky. She remembered the invitation of her friend, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, who encouraged her to write psalms of lament to create sacred space for her mourning. This invitation led to her book *Psalms of Lament*, which not only brought her comfort and healing but has continued to bring healing to all who read it.

Here is a short prayer-poem from her on our connection to the compassion and suffering of Christ:

*Jesus wept, And in his weeping, He joined himself forever To those who mourn. He stands now throughout all time, This Jesus weeping, With his arms about the weeping ones: "Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted." He stands with the mourners, For his name is God-with-us. Jesus wept.*

*"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."* Someday, God will wipe the tears from Rachel's eyes.

*In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life, There is a deafening alleluia Rising from the souls Of those who weep, And of those who weep with those who weep. If you watch, you will see The hand of God Putting the stars back in their skies One by one.*

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### **A Guided Meditation on the Virtue of Compassion**

Today, I invite you to be with the pain you carry. It may be your own grief, a burden you feel from the world, or the suffering of someone you love. Let's enter a quiet space together for a few moments.

Please find a comfortable position. You can close your eyes if you wish, or simply soften your gaze.

Now, take a deep breath. Inhale slowly through your nose, filling your lungs with the air of this moment... and exhale slowly through your mouth, releasing any tension you may be holding. Take another deep, slow breath, in... and out.

Imagine that you are a tree with deep roots. Feel yourself grounded, connected to the earth. Your roots go down, holding you steady. This ground is the presence of God, a constant, loving force that holds you, no matter what storms you face.

Now, bring to mind a pain you are carrying. It may be from a past loss, a current struggle, or a quiet sorrow in your heart. Don't push it away. Just acknowledge it. Say to yourself, "This is a moment of pain. I see you." This is **self-compassion**, a profound act of love for yourself.

As you stand here, rooted and centered, bring to mind someone you know who is suffering. Perhaps a friend, a family member, or even a stranger whose story has touched your heart. You don't have to fix their pain, just be with them. Imagine you are standing beside them, offering your silent, compassionate presence. Say to yourself, "This is a moment of pain for them. I will be here with them." This is **compassion for others**.

Finally, feel the strength of your roots, the deep connection to the loving ground beneath you. Remember that you are not alone in your pain, nor are you alone in your compassion for others. The source of this love is God. Imagine that the love that flows from the earth up through your roots is God's compassion, nourishing and sustaining you, and flowing through you to those you are holding in your heart. Feel God's arms wrapped around you and all who mourn, just as Jesus wept and joined himself to the weeping ones.

Rest in this place of deep connection for a moment. Feel the peace of not being alone, of being held, and of holding others.

When you are ready, gently open your eyes. Carry this peace and this compassion with you as you go forth. May you be blessed. Amen.