



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

A Time for Lament

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

June 28, 2015

I remember when my grandmother died. I was about 11. I also remember being as truly shocked when I heard someone laughing in the neighborhood the next day and that all of the normal ordinary things of life, like the mail truck coming around, just kept on going. It seemed to me that there must have been a failure in some communications system; for how could they not know that something so sad and painful had happened? Dee Dee had died and I guess I thought that it should have mattered to everybody. It was made worse when I realized that we who were grieving were a very small number indeed. I felt even more isolated and not sure how to handle such pain. In my 11 year old melodramatic way of processing things, I dwelt on what had been a popular song, not too many years before - "The End of the World" by Skeeter Davis. "Why does the sun go on shining? Why does the sea rush to shore? Don't they know it's the end of the world, cause you don't love me anymore?" I'm old enough now to recognize that that's a really terrible song but at the time I found comfort in it, knowing that the pain that I was feeling wasn't unknown to others. Someone else had felt the same grieving loneliness - Don't they know it the end of the world 'cause Dee Dee's not there waiting for me to come home from school, anymore.

Skeeter Davis was, by no stretch of the imagination, in the same universe with the poetry of the Old Testament, but, she had written a kind of a lament for heartbreak; and it functioned exactly as a lament should. A lament is an expression of sorrow, suffering and distress, addressed to God. It is cathartic because it acknowledges pain, allowing it to be felt deeply while still trusting in God's ultimate care for us.

In the Bible there are many laments, in the Psalms, 2 Samuel, Isaiah and Jeremiah. They fall into two types and our readings this morning give us one of each. The first is a lament over the death of someone or something. David's lament over the death of Saul and Jonathan is a mournful dirge. He is lamenting their deaths on several levels. His relationship with Saul was fraught with Saul's emotional and mental deterioration which had been murderously directed at David. But Saul was his king and perhaps David was mourning for a whole nation. His grief was even deeper for Jonathan whom he loved as he loved no one else. So profound was David's grief that he too wished nature to grieve along with him. He cursed the mountain on which they had died, that it would suffer from drought and produce nothing of beauty or value. He could not imagine the world turning as usual any more than I could in my 11 year old despair.

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The second kind of lament is found in Psalm 130; it is a cry of anguish and a plea for deliverance. "Out of the depth have I called to you, O God." When we have dwelt in the depths, we need to be heard. Psalm 130 sounds to me like a cry from Emmanuel Church in Charleston and from the heart of all of our black brothers and sisters. Have we finally begun to really hear their pain?

Author and theologian Elizabeth Webb says "The sad truth is that human beings can be downright unmade in the depths. The deepest suffering not only can tear at our flesh and our hearts, it can strip us of all that makes us who we are, such that we feel that our very selves are lost. To someone in this state, whose stolen self is unable to issue the prayer for God's hearing, what does Psalm 130 offer?"

Together with the gentle companionship of others who have known suffering and redemption, the words of Psalm 130 can be a healing balm to the shattered soul, offering assurance of God's endless mercy, and of the divine companionship that will remake all that is broken. Psalm 130 issues a calling to the assembled to claim for each and all of us the vast mercy of God and to companion one another through and out of the myriad abysses we each and all encounter." Amen to that.

Laments have a particular form, a structure. First of all, they address God, and describe the distress. There is often an expression of trust in God presence, recalling the saving work of God in past times. Then there is the plea for help, and often some kind of a *why* question, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The lament then looks to a time when God's help will be manifest, an expression of confidence and trust in God. And finally, it moves to praise.

Michael Card is a song writer, author, and Biblical teacher. In his book *A Sacred Sorrow; Reaching out to God in the Lost Language of Lament* he says, "Jesus understood that lament was the only true response of faith to the brokenness and fallenness of the world. It provides the only trustworthy bridge to God across the deep seismic quaking of our lives,"

Card talks about how desperately we need the language of lament in our worship. We might not need it at the funeral of someone who died peacefully in their sleep at age 98 but there are too many times when we do. The funerals have begun in Charleston and that community cannot be told to just celebrate the lives of their friends and grandmothers and focus on heaven. The words of Psalm 13 seem tragically appropriate.

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How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

They must be allowed to lament the violence done to their community and to find comfort in the presence of others who are willing to hear their pain. No amount of lamentation will restore their loved ones but it is the work of a lament is to put suffering into a larger context, hoping that their pain will somehow serve a greater purpose. Card says, “I call that redemptive suffering. Lament is not about psychology, about getting things off your chest. It’s about true worship—offering up as a sacrifice your brokenness and pain to God.”

There's no doubt in my mind that God hears the cry of Black Americans. The uncertainty is whether or not we truly will. Perhaps this tragic moment will finally strip off any rose-colored glasses that have allowed us just not really see the racism that poisons our common life. It's huge, certainly too big for any one person or one congregation to overthrow. And that's another part of the work of a lament. It gives us all permission to admit that there are some things that we alone cannot fix, and that sometimes all we can do is sit with one another in the ashes as Job's friends did with him. That is true compassion - to suffer with another. It is honest, vulnerable and ultimately hopeful. After the past ten days, I cannot imagine anything that we humans need more than the hope that every good lament gives...

Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,

for he will speak peace to his people,

to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. ^[a]

⁹ Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet together;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

¹² The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

¹³ Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a pathway for his steps.

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