

Lamentations 1: 3-6, 2 Timothy 1: 7-9 "Suffering & Power" Rev. Janet Chapman 10/6/19

Some of you know that Ivy, my daughter, had an accident in my car a few weeks ago and it was a total loss. I am forever grateful she is ok but I was unprepared for how the event would affect me- it is, after all, just a car that is replaceable. It was the first vehicle I ever purchased on my own, having bought cars before in partnership with my ex-husband or parents. But that turned out not to be as big of an issue as I thought. What became the issue was discovering that the insurance company I had put my faith, trust, and money into with full coverage decided at the very last minute not to cover the claim. A week ago Friday, after they sent my totaled car off to the salvage yard in Sacramento, I suddenly received word they would be returning it to me and not paying for the damages. On Monday, I received notification that they cancelled my policy back to the Sept. 1st origination date claiming that I had failed to reveal my daughter living with me even though she had her own insurance and car. Because apparently it is California law that every individual living in your home 14 and older must be noted on your policy as either excluded or included, whether they drive or not, whether they have additional insurance or not, no matter what. Without boring you with too many of the details, I will let you know that failing to disclose my daughter would not have been something I would have done; it is just too much a part of my identity, my story, and specifically when it comes to insurance because her multiple speeding tickets (she's gonna love that I'm sharing this) necessitated her getting her own policy and paying for it. Therefore, I tell everyone, she has her own car and own insurance, which has been a hard but valuable lesson for her. And this is where it becomes a "he said, she said" thing in which a trusted attorney is requesting the audiotapes of the application interview to hopefully resolve the dispute. What has troubled me most in this whole situation is the sense of hopelessness and isolation which sets in when

dealing with a major entity that holds so much power and money at its disposal. Feeling betrayed, out of control, angry, and often sad, you begin to wonder who can be trusted? What is it about some people who insist on winning at all costs, who avoid doing what is right if it means having to admit they were wrong? I recognize that I am not the first to feel this way, nor will I be the last. I also acknowledge that my very raw experience is only a tiny portion of what so many face on a daily basis, often with far more serious consequences.

The book of Lamentations portrays the serious consequences of the Babylon invasion upon the city of Jerusalem. Its story could come right out of our evening news – dead bodies, flames, buildings in rubble, people reduced to statistics, dreams and hopes destroyed, beauty turned into destruction, conglomerates swallowing up individuals like ants in a jungle. The first chapter personifies Jerusalem as a woman, a mother, who is mourning the loss of her children and her honor. Personalizing the city in such a way draws the reader more closely into the pain and suffering involved. The year is 587 BCE and after a lengthy siege, Nebuchadnezzar's armies broke into Jerusalem, slaughtering the inhabitants, raping the women, seizing the power brokers such as priests, king and court, scribes and accountants, and herding them west to Babylon. The great majority of people were left to find for themselves. The economy quickly collapsed, food sources disappeared, water sources became foul, and the daily rhythms of life ceased. In the poetry of this book, we are called to remember each mother, each father, each son and daughter, and what they went through. These people weep for their loss, they weep because they feel abandoned, they weep in deep hurt and despair. Whereas Lamentations holds a strong place in the Bible for Jews because of events like the Holocaust, white Christians have tended to avoid the book, as Walter Brueggeman notes. In the past several hundred

years, we have enjoyed privilege culturally, politically, and economically. As a result, our losses were never so deep... and no one did a “Final Solution” on us in ways that were done to the Jews.

Yet, before we dismiss Lamentations as far removed from our reality, I would invite you to consider places of sadness and despair in our nation and community. Suicide is on the rise, specifically among our military, which has a direct correlation to fellow service members following suit. Elderly sit alone in care facilities with no one to visit them, no one who appears to care if they live or die. The mentally ill hide from their illness fearing the stigma which may force them out of mainstream society and into oblivion. The poor find jobs that barely pay the rent let alone childcare; they choose food over medicines scared they will lose custody of their children if they are not fed. We are watching the old world we have trusted and counted on vanish before our eyes. There is a deep loss among us that gives way to deep anxiety that produces deep resentment and occasionally even violence. Within Lamentations, we are reminded that the suffering of one individual extends to the whole community, the whole nation. Its message points to the reality that pain and suffering are never meant to be done in solitude or isolation. The same message is reflected in the book of Jeremiah, therefore, there are those who believe this depressing book was written by him. The prophet Jeremiah had just witnessed the end of Judah, the destruction of the temple and palace, and the exile of the final Davidic king, Zedekiah, after the murder of his children before his very eyes. Jeremiah’s writings consistently speak of community over individual suffering, of a grief that is shared by many in covenant with one another. It is that kind of suffering that grabs at our hearts when we hear of 2 brothers from Redding being killed in the Boeing 737max airliner crash, that kind

of grief that pulls at us when a mother of 3 is kidnapped from Mountain Gate on a morning jog, that corporate suffering that connects us to every Carr and Camp fire survivor around us. Their hurt is our hurt to the point that they are indistinguishable. This is the power of being in true community with one another.

On this World Communion Sunday, we blend the celebration of our world-wide unity in Christ along with the remembrance of suffering, Christ's suffering, our suffering, the world's suffering. Today is a reminder that that we cannot hold the suffering of our lives alone, but it is meant to be a shared experience which can provide great consolation. The apostle Paul writes in Colossians, "It makes me happy to suffer for you, as I am suffering now, and in my own body to do what I can to make up all that still has to be undergone by Christ" (1:24). However, please know this is not meant to elevate some sort of masochistic lifestyle. Richard Rohr notes that the only way out of deep sadness is to go with it and through it. The only way to deal with suffering on a spiritual level, and not let it destroy us, is to recognize that we cannot do it alone. Believe me, I've tried. There was a time not too long ago that I strongly believed in not sharing my personal struggles with others; that I must keep it under wraps, and not burden others. But that is an unhealthy practice which not only does this day confront but also the scriptures.

In 2 Timothy, the author writing in the spirit of Paul says to Timothy, "Join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God." Suffering-power is the central mystery of our faith and it is enacted in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This mysterious relationship between suffering and power is what the church is invited to help teach and foster for God's people. The truth is that when we try to heroically suffer on our own, we slip into distractions, denials, and pretending, and we don't learn what Rohr calls' "suffering's softening

lessons.” When we remember that we are all in this together and that many times, everybody else has it just as hard as we do, then we are kept from the dangers of self-pity and self-preoccupation. We steer away from the “poor me” syndrome and towards restorative healing and justice. C.S. Lewis wrote, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in the midst of our pains.” God can use our pain like a megaphone to rouse a deaf world. On this World Communion Sunday, I am aware that I need to commune with my fellow brothers and sisters sharing and leaning upon them as I likewise offer myself as support. I cannot do this alone. And maybe that is ok. Spread before us this day are not just the good gifts of God but also the suffering of this world, the grief of loss, the steel edge of violence, the restless anxiety of need and rage. We notice both, signs of God’s presence and signs of deep need...we notice both and we embrace both, because in our faith they often come together. The world does not notice, didn’t notice Jerusalem in crisis, doesn’t notice need alongside our ease. But because we are close to Jesus, we notice and we engage. Suffering in the Gospel is not masochistic but rather is acting, living, praying and sharing in the awareness that our life is united with those who suffer. We know about God’s reliable power which works in us as God entrusts to us the capacity to heal and transform. So that when we notice as Jesus notices, when we answer as Jesus answered, working in partnership with God’s purpose and grace as 2 Timothy says, we find ourselves transformed away from self-sufficiency and into solidarity, away from private privilege and into communal engagement, away from hard, dismissive indifference and into compassion. So dear friends, “join me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to God’s own purpose and grace.” Amen.