

“Lament”

Message for 2-21-21

West Branch Friends Church

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Today I would like to spend some time in lament. Lament: to mourn aloud; wail; to regret strongly; a crying out in grief...

Long ago and far away, I was in seminary. Sometimes what I learned there seems long ago and far away. Today I'd like to talk about something that has stuck with me through everything – good times, tough times, changes in theology, changes in churches, changes in the world around me. This doesn't mean I've practiced it well, mind you. But the need for it has remained.

Long ago in that seminary time, in a course on ministry for social justice, we talked about lament. Lament as a tool for social justice. Lament as a tool to keep each of us mindful of others, moving forward, in touch with God and maybe even somewhat sane and upright in the course of our ministry.

Now there were – and are -- many who doubted the usefulness of lament. One young woman exclaimed, “This injustice has happened to me all my life! I don't have any time to “boo-hoo” about anything, I'm mad and I'm tired and it is time to act!”

She's not wrong. And for people of color, the trauma, the ancestral, generational, on-going injustice is something white people cannot fathom. There's nothing like a little righteous anger to spur you forward, harness your energy, and launch a movement.

AND...

And I believe that lament can actually get us to a place where we can speak with one another about hard things. I believe that lament can help express that which we have a hard time naming. I believe that laments are, in fact, essential to gathering us together on common ground.

You all know me as a person of “riotous joy”. This is true. I believe that riotous joy is around us and available to us each and every day, in all of the normalcy – and difficulty --- of life. I try to live out of riotous joy as much as I can.

I also believe that lament can actually help get me to riotous joy. It can point that joy out for me. I believe that joy without feeling sorrow, or pain, or anger, or disgust can be a hollow substitute for real joy. I believe that we have to feel what we feel – and name it -- in order to connect with each other, to begin to understand each other, to find common ground, and to find a way not only to move forward, but to move to address those things that cause us to lament.

We began this month – this Black History Month – with a look at the role of the institutional church in white supremacy – in white Christian supremacy. Last week we took a look at what love means in a faith community --- what it should look like, what it shouldn't look like, and how much work it really requires of us.

Today lament is going to help us see how we can come together in community despite differences in theology, differences in politics, differences in belief, differences in practice, and most of all despite the limitations of the words of our language. It is something I think we can share with our deeply divided world. It is a practice that perhaps can begin to bridge those divisions, to find common ground, and to see where we can work together for the common good. Hearing each other's laments is a way to allow each other some grace – the grace given to each of us, and all of us. But we need to practice.

Last week, Sue reminded us that words matter. And as a faith community, it is good for us to examine our words and how we use them. We would never want anyone to feel unwelcome – particularly because of a certain way we expressed an opinion. This is sacred space – whether we meet online or in person, and each person is welcomed and treated and loved like the beloved child of God that they are. And still, the hard things of this world, and our call as followers of Jesus to address them must be spoken. We cannot simply be silent.

I believe lament can get us to this place. Now, I am not speaking of sharing our prayer concerns. This is an important practice and praying for and with each other is a powerful thing. However, I am talking about noticing and reflecting and being moved by the things that bring pain, sorrow, injustice, persecution, oppression, feelings of helplessness – in you, and all around you. I'm talking about the things that bring you so much anger and hurt that you know you can't ignore it, that you must do something – anything -- about it, but you're not quite sure where to start. I'm talking about the feeling you get when you find yourself stuck in something and you don't quite know how to even go about getting out of it. I'm talking about feeling like even God has abandoned us. In fact, that is often how it is expressed in scripture.

Our scriptures are full of lament. In fact, there's an entire book called Lamentations, written by Jeremiah, detailing the lament of the people in exile from their beloved Jerusalem. There is the book of Job detailing the events in the life of this one man and his lament – and rant – at God. There are at least 37 Psalms of individual lament in our Bible, and at least 10 psalms of communal lament. The beginning of Psalm 12 is an example: "Help, O Lord, for there is no longer anyone who is godly; the faithful have disappeared from humankind. They utter lies to each other; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak." Perhaps the most well-known lament of all is: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Recently, I watched a movie on Netflix called "The Trial of the Chicago 7". I highly recommend it. It is an account of the trial of protestors after the violent events in Chicago in 1968. At the end of the trial of these individuals, the judge tells the defendants they can make a statement to the jury before sentencing, but they must pick one of their group to do it. They select Tom Hayden. Now, he could have written a statement defending the group. He could have talked about their innocence. He could have railed against "the system". Instead, he simply chose to read the names and ages of the 4, 782 men who had died in the Vietnam war during their lengthy trial. This is lament. Now in this not-so-large room there were MANY dividing lines: divisions of politics, of race, of ideology, of theology, of ethnicity, culture, language...so many divisions in that courtroom. But lament brought the people in that room to common ground. In spite of all their differences and divisions, despite the fact that many people in that room truly despised one another and wished each other ill, they could come together to mourn this incredible loss of so many young lives. This is lament.

The deep feelings expressed in lament come to us all. Despite our differences in belief, practice, and approach, expressing these feelings can help us find common ground. If I were in a “high” church worship today, I might have prepared a litany to guide us through lament as an entire community together. But today, we can practice lament together in the most Quaker way – through our open worship. Today, as we move into this time of Communion after the Manner of Friends, I invite you to open yourself to what practicing and sharing lament may do.

Sit in silence and wait upon the Spirit. When the Spirit visits, perhaps you may be moved to acknowledge something you lament. If so, I invite you to share it – aloud, or perhaps in the chat. I am going to gather these laments – the laments of our community, and with your permission we will read them (without names – simply the lament itself) and see where we find common ground. What are the things that we lament individually that we find that we hold in common? These are good places to begin. To begin to mend division caused by other forces such as politics. To begin to act upon these things as a community of faith. To begin to be in service – to God and to the greater community and world we live in as a community of faith united by common goals. To begin to love God with all our heart, and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Let us begin.

I will share something that weighs upon my heart: It feels as if in our world today, that some lives matter more than others, and it is breaking my heart.

What do you lament this day?