

On Lamentations: Sad, Mad, Glad

August 14, 2016

Luke 17:5-10, Lamentations 3:21-36

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be guided by your Spirit and give glory to you, merciful and gracious God, Amen.

Cleansing breath.

Also, breathe in God's Spirit. Breathe out what is not of God.

Lamentation: "the passionate expression of grief or sorrow; weeping"

Lamentation paints with the primary colors of feelings

Blue, red, yellow are the primary colors. The other colors are a blend of these.

Sad, mad, glad are the primary emotions:

Speaking of colors: Lament means singing the Blues, that great gift of the American tradition, the African American tradition.

Today we're letting our heart feel, praying our feeling, by speaking the Blues.

Don't be concerned about catching all the words of the sermon: copies of the sermon will be available on the church website this week. Pray your feelings and let the Spirit minister... to your heart and to all of us.

Grief is often overwhelming.

Often, it's just too much, so we go numb for some protection.

Grief has a tumble of emotion, often confusing. Grief also moves....

Sad, Mad Glad.

The Book of Lamentations in the Bible says it this way:

Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven.

It's a humble & dignified posture: Lifting up hearts & hands to God.

There is a power to lamentation.

- Lamentation is honest speech.
- Lament opens the hidden recesses human impulse and feeling
 - For instance, "I want retribution" -or-
 - "I feel abandoned."
 - Lament gives us voices when any other words fails us.
- Jesus prayed the psalms, especially the lament Psalms.
 - Almost half of the Bible's Psalms are lament
- Laments name enemies
 - And those enemies are not only external
 - Those voices inside that haunt us taunt us.
- Lament gives us the power to act
 - If we cannot say we are angry at God, can we truly be angry with the powers that be... and so act to change them?
 - Anger has its place.
 - Anger sounds an alarm that something has been violated.
 - Anger gives us power to act.
 - The Bible does not say "do not be angry."
 - Rather, "In your anger, do not sin" says the letter to the Ephesians.
 - When is anger sin?
 - When it is self-justification.
 - Sin is self-justification:
 - The inflation of the ego saying, "I am right."
 - And the inability to see another, and honor the sacredness of another.
- Lament also reveals the heart of God

- That we can bring all our pain and anger and accusation to God.
- God is big enough, gracious enough, strong and gentle enough to receive all our raw humanity.
- Lamentation is the path to resurrection
 - Death precedes resurrection
 - Lament names the deaths.

Lament

- Names God
- Blames God

God is big enough to embrace us and what we feel.

If God is holding us, we don't have to be hostages to our emotions.

We can have our emotions, rather than our emotions having us.

Most of you know my last day at TPPC will be September 30.

Between now and then, many of us will have 1:1 conversations.

On September 11, we will have a congregational meeting to dissolve our pastoral relationship.

Today I want to pay attention to grief and thanksgiving.

My aim:

To Lament: to voice honest speech.

To be honest about what is hurting all of us.

To feel....and to name dynamics in the church that we may each be able to find ourselves within them.

KEY:

Hope this congregation notes its patterns and prayerfully chooses to walk a different path from here forward, humbled and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Want to say three things after each emotion; Mad, Sad, Glad. And, then, make 3 recommendations.

Cleansing breath. Also, breathe in God's Spirit. Breathe out what is not of God.

###

SAD

"Let tears stream down like a torrent day and night. Pour out your heart like water before the presence of God" says Lamentations.

And it continues with...."Although God causes grief"

An aching heart cries out to God, even at God, in pain.

I am very sad. Maybe you are, too.

#1 That our relationship is ending now.

- Moved here on my birthday in 2006.
- Came with dreams
 - Moving to the nation's capital, a progressive town and church, a church that loves kids....so much seemed possible.
- Wanted to raise my daughter graduate from high school as a part of this church. Yet she has 2 years remaining.

#2 I had wanted to alter the decades-long patterns of conflict much more than I was able to.

- Please forgive my inability to challenge this church more.

- Please forgive my inability to weave more healing grace here.
- One of the first things I did here was to interview as many of the living pastors of this congregation as I could..
- Took history.
- Thought I could alter the course of conflict more than I did.
- Where there is a pattern, there is also a choice
 - Once you see a pattern, can choose if you want to continue it.

#3 I am heartbroken.

- This is my community.
- Takoma Park is my home. My family and I are not leaving town, but I cannot remain at TPPC.

I do not want to leave you, but I must. When I realized I could not help heal the problems any longer, I knew I needed to go.

The pastor and the Session are no longer working in concert.

The congregation is at a limit.

Soulfulness is needed.

A revival of kindness,

And Soulful repentance.

Our actions, especially our treatment of one another in this congregation needs to match the Gospel we proclaim.

It is possible to be the humble witnesses to God's reign.

Cleansing breath.

Also, breathe in God's Spirit. Breathe out what is not of God.

Before we get to the next emotion: a moment of thanks.

The Deacons of this congregation serve with great compassion, reaching out to people in joy and sorrow. If you are now, or ever were ordained Deacon of this church, could you stand up or wave? Church, please join me in saying thank you.

And the Elders of the church, the members of our church council called the Session, work with dedication, commitment and so many hours of service, often unseen and with heartache. If you are now an Elder or ever have been ordained as one, please stand up or wave? Church, please join me in saying thank you.

###

MAD

“To be filled with insults” is the way Lamentations puts it.

I am Mad. Maybe you are too.

- o You may be angry that the pastor is leaving.
- o You may be angry that the pastor is leaving now
 - § Some may wish the pastor had left earlier;
 - § Some may wish the pastor would stay longer.

To understand why I am leaving now, lets name the 3 key areas that anger me:

#1 Financial and administrative irregularities, especially in Session

Please read carefully the May Session minutes, the June Session minutes, the July Session minutes, and in the August Session minutes, the pastor’s report. It’s all there.

Especially if you are on the capital campaign team, please read the minutes.

In May and June, the majority of Session made decisions that threaten the survival of this congregation. The pastor filed written protests detailing concerns.

In July, Session approved a several-page statement repudiating those protests. That July Session meeting is when I knew I needed to leave.

#2 Unkindness

That's the word that first occurred to me.

But then I realized lament is honest speech.

Bullying is a more accurate word than unkindness.

Bullying within Session has led multiple elders to resign.

In the last 6 months, two elders have resigned from Session.

Perhaps every year in the last 10, an elder has resigned before completing his or her term on Session.

Bullying has pushed a number of families out of the church.

Just one small recent example, one of many, from a few weeks ago.

An elder came to the pastor's study to object....to object because the pastor had listed the financial and administrative irregularities in the Session minutes. Then, the elder gave the pastor the finger, you know, flipped the bird, the single digit salute.

Now that's just immaturity.

But it symbolizes how members of this church treat each other all too often.

Another symptom of the bullying?the pattern of pastors being pushed out in congregational conflict.

In the last 60 years, pastors have stayed an average 8.5 years.

It's the same song over and over again, 1st verse, 2nd verse, 3rd verse, 4th verse, 5th verse and now the 6th verse.

(Look at the actual numbers on the photo graphs in the sanctuary.)

Among those pastors, there have been

- 3 divorces
- Multiple experiences of extreme emotional distress.
- Each of these pastors left unhappily.
- This is a congregation that is very hard on its pastors, but even more on one another.
- But the pastors' leaving is not the problem. It's a symptom of the underlying problems.

Just when major growth or change can happen, its thwarted by the pastor being pushed out.

Is it really so scary to trust the Holy Spirit....to trust that the Holy Spirit will transform us?

Because it seems that just when the church is on the threshold of major transformation, it keeps being thwarted.

The town of Takoma Park is often an unkind place, but TPPC can be the place to shift that dynamic, to transform it, and be salt & light and leaven for the community.

Where there is a pattern, there is a choice.

Do you want to continue the pattern?

Or do you want to humbly seek God's desire for you and the church?

#3 Paired pattern: too-muchness and not-enoughness

- Too much: a small group of members taking the reins to direct the church where they are sure it needs to go,
- It's part of the headstrong culture of this town, Takoma Park
 - This headstrong, aggressive "advocacy" culture is mostly concerned about being right. We care too little for one another, and for the good of the whole. Our calling is to honor one another as the multiply gifted Body of Christ. (I Corinthians 12)
- At the same time, those who may differ or have gifts to offer often withdraw, not wanting to be part of the aggression.
 - Too much action is paired with too little.
 - Now is the time for each member, each leader to reflect, pray and repent of our part.
 - Repentance is the opposite of repudiation
 - Repentance is the opposite of denial.
 - Repentance looks a lot like Alcoholics Anonymous 12 steps, all of them. Especially #4 and #5.

Step #4 Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step #5 Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Where there is a pattern, there is a choice.

Do you want to continue the pattern?

Or do you want to humbly seek God's desire for you and the church?

Cleansing breath.

Also, breathe in God's Spirit. Breathe out what is not of God.

7th inning stretch: Stretch if you want, Shake it off, Get some ice water.

###

GLAD

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

That's how Lamentations puts it.

I am glad. Maybe you will be too, eventually.

I'm glad because I'm answering next step of calling (more on vocation in the next 2 sermons in September)

I'll name 3 things I hope I have shared with you.

Then I'll name 3 thanksgivings, what you have shared with me.

I hope I have shared with you:

#1 Passion for sharing in good news of the love, mercy and Justice of the Living God in Jesus Christ, including through community organizing.

#2 Compassionate pastoral care, I hope, in times of crisis and loss. I hope I've provided some stability across 10 years, when the church had been rocked by instability in the early 2000's. I hope something of God's grace has shone through me.

#3 A love of children and youth, establishing a more robust confirmation class, set of mission trips and youth ministry.

What you have shared with me. The list of blessings is so long, it is hard to limit it to three.

- #1 Music ministry. How I worship every week. Thank you choir and musicians. God bless Dr. James Bingham for his long and faithful ministry here.
- #2 You've shared your hearts and life stories, especially within the growing immigrant ministry
- #3 Youth - hardest to leave you.

We have shared so much on retreats, mission trips and confirmation classes.

I'm concerned what's happening in our church will damage your faith.

Please know God is faithful.

People are fallible, and God is always faithful.

Church is not yet fully the kingdom of God, but it's often been called a hospital for sinners.

We are wounded people. But something remarkable can happen. By God's grace we can be transformed.

And what's even more remarkable, as we experience God's grace and healing, we can become healers of others.

Transformed people transform people.

The wounded can become healers.

However, the opposite can happen.

Wounded people also wound people.

What we do not transform, we transmit.

So humility is so important, to name our need for God, and be transformed by God's grace, so we do not transmit our pain.

There is some good in this time: we can learn to really say goodbye well. Really connecting in the coming weeks as we say goodbye.

This ending is not good. It is not a happy ending.

But good can come of it. God is faithful.

Romans 8:28 “we know that, in all things, God works for the good of those who love God who have been called according to Gods purpose.”

###

Lamentations says

Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven.

- Lamentation is emotion AND action, hearts and hands
- Lifting hearts and hands is an action of humility as we turn to God.

3 key tasks for the healing & ministry of this congregation.

4 c's: Capital Campaign, Conflict and Calling

#1 To have a successful Capital Campaign

(1) Revise the accounting for special offerings – both how special offerings receipts are tracked and how a budget is developed for spending special offerings.

Revise the accounting for both the income and for the expenses of special offerings.

(2) Balance the operating budget for 2016 and 2017.

#2 Conflict:

- If you want medicine strong enough to help, commitment is needed.
- Commit to honest speech
- Commit to address pattern of conflict.

- Commit to a consultant, for we have proven over 60 years that we cannot resolve the pattern on our own.
- Fearlessly create a conflict timeline
 - Be very, very specific.
 - Look for patterns
 - Hold one another accountable to the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. (Read Philippians 3 which describes this).

Some of you are saying you want to leave. That's understandable.

However, the pastor is not asking you to leave and does not want you to leave. The opposite in fact: please seek the wellbeing of your congregation and stay.

If I had to diagnose the condition here, I would say the church has an advanced case of the human condition.

And it is a chronic condition. Each of us has it, and there is no place to escape from it. What better place to learn to live with the messiness of human life?

But there is a balm that can help us live that with the human condition.

That balm is friendship. And friendship is the strongest reason for staying.

You may not like how this pastorate is ending. Not like it at all.

But the friendships here are strong and real. Please do not give them up.

It is possible for this church to make it through these changes together.

Please stay. There is much grace here still.

#3 Calling – live your calling through service in church

- Dean Hoge, was an elder of this congregation and a nationally known scholar on congregation dynamics. He said of TPPC
 - “There is a place for low commitment churches”.

- Consider how to respond to that identity for our church
- Revitalized life – live your calling in Christ, especially through the Body of Christ gathered.

Fearlessly feeling, honestly naming, recognizing what had died, what is wounded, what cries out to be healed.

That is the ground of resurrection.

Now some will take the counsel for honest speech as license.

License to speak brutally. License to denounce others.

Anticipate it. Expect it. No need to be surprised by it. Just observe it. Don't have to do it yourself.

Name bullying when it happens. Call it out.

It's a pattern.

But another choice is possible.

Honest speech also involves in soulful listening. And speaking again. And listening again. Back & forth, time after time, in relationship.

James 4:9-11 puts it this way.

Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters

Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord

Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord

And God shall lift you up

Up into heaven

And God Shall lift you up

(sung slowly 3 times)

Benediction

(Henri-Frederic Amiel – 1885)

Life is short,
And we do not have much time
to gladden the hearts of those who
make the journey with us.
So... be swift to love,
and make haste to be kind.
And the blessing of God,
who made us,
who loves us,
and who travels with us
be with you now and forever