

From Lament to Celebration

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Home. Some would say it is the sweetest word in the English language. In fact, it may sound just as sweet in any language. For many people, the idea of home has a warm, safe feeling and is a place of refuge, safety, and comfort. It is at the core of our earliest memories, where we learn much of what we know. It is the place where we go when we are tired, alone, and afraid. It gives us strength. It is the place where we remember happy times: laughter, tears, and hugs. Christmases, birthdays, graduations, and a host of other moments are celebrated there with the ones who are close to us.

Many images of home come to my mind. There is the traditional image of home with two parents and children, perhaps a dog or a cat or both. There are modern day images of homes with different configurations of family. I think soldiers who went to war couldn't wait to come home meaning Canada and the places they actually lived. Another image of home is the church. Many times I have heard folks speak of their church home, usually meaning the faith community they grew up.

I think we all know too, that as sweet as home can be, there are times when the home is hurting, fractured, broken. If there are problems in the home, in the family, do we give up on the idea of family? Surely not. When something is broken in nature, it works to mend the affected part. A tree that has been wounded brows a burl, a scar that covers the wound. The tree adapts and then keeps on growing, perhaps in a new direction.

When we sense something is broken in our social structures, which affects the home we call community, nation or world, we want to heal the hurt just as nature does. But there are some who try to hide from the pain in some self-destructive responses, withdrawing from the world or becoming violent to themselves and others.

I believe that is where we enter the story in Jeremiah today. Jeremiah 8 is filled with provocative and disturbing imagery that describes the plight of the people of God who have been unfaithful to God. The primary visual image for the first three verses of this chapter is that of the bones of the kings, officials, priests, prophets and inhabitants of Jerusalem. The bones are spread on the barren ground, neither gathered nor buried. The imagery is of death. Following these verses there comes a messenger formula "Thus says the Lord..." and a series of indictments against the community.

There are verses descriptive of a people who do not do what is natural; that is to turn back to Yahweh. The people are described as people who go astray and do not turn back. They have no intention of turning back. The next verses question the wisdom of a people who think they are wise. Then come the threats and then tragedy unfolds. The

people finally speak and they perceive Yahweh as a God who has doomed them to perish.

The rhetoric effectively betrays the panic and the urgency of those who can no longer avoid the prophetic word. There is no healing; there is terror as the predicted devastation comes to pass. The home, the house of Judah is broken.

Then in today's reading we observe the movement to lament. The anger of Yahweh and the despair of the community bring uncontrollable grief to the prophet who loves both Yahweh and people. He hears the cry of the people from across the land; he also hears the cry of Yahweh who cannot understand why the people have continued to provoke. The prophet stands between the people and God and with the people. The cries from both are deafening. He finds that his joy is gone and his heart is sick. The hurt of the people has become his own.

It is difficult in chapter 8 to determine clear beginnings and endings to units. It is difficult to determine who is speaking to whom. But this confusion underscores the profound and immense emotional experience of each character in the story. Grief blurs vision. Boundaries become unclear and speech comes spontaneously. In times of lament and mourning there are often uncontrollable outpourings of grief. When one speech ends, or even before another begins so that sounds blend and there is a never ending roar of weeping and wailing. The laments of the prophet and of God become indistinguishable. It is the immense sadness we feel when we cannot help or heal another. "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Is there nowhere these people can turn? The prophet feels helpless and hopeless. God feels helpless and hopeless.

There is not a more poignant picture in the Hebrew Scriptures of the suffering God. The God who speaks in Jeremiah 8 is a vulnerable, hurting God who is affected by the faithfulness and faithlessness of the covenant partner to whom God is committed. The people do not "know" God. The intimacy of the relationship has been lost.

I believe each one of us have felt in one way or another brokenness, brokenness in our family, our home, our church, our community, brokenness when we hear and see world situations where there is pain and suffering. Brokenness invites us, calls us, begs us to lament. It's not something we do well but we are learning that we need to get better at it to heal. David Runcorn, author of *Choice, Desire and the Will of God*, writes lament gives birth to praise and renews it. Nancy Reeves, who has written books on grieving and mourning, says we need to learn how to wail again.

Jeremiah invites us to sing There is a Balm in Gilead. One of the things we know about grief and mourning is that is a necessary process, but so often in our Sunday morning worship we really want to feel good. We want the circus to come to town; we want the children to sing; we want entertainment.

It's easy for people particularly in North America, to look good on the outside, but to be walking wounded, and to run from passages that invite us to grieve and to

mourn what is not right. This is a good opportunity to be in Gilead for a while, and to not pretend everything is all right, and to release and let go of those things that ache and hurt and cause us pain.

Sometimes we're afraid to create those moments of vulnerability in our congregations, but it's an important thing to do. We might squirm a little at first but in the mourning and releasing of the grief, in the acknowledgement of disappointment, we are healed.

Our Thursday Noon hour Bible Study group is currently looking at the lectionary and so one of the questions posed this week was to think about lamenting in conjunction with our church. What if anything do we lament? I'm not sure if I gave them time to answer before I started talking – which happens quite often but they still come and we have a great time.

We talked about lamenting the decline in numbers, the fact that it is not possible for us to all know each others names, that it is not possible for Jim and I to have a personal visit with each one of you. We lamented the decision to return from two services to one even though the services were meeting the spiritual needs of many folks in different ways. We lamented that it is not possible for us to be considered what is called a pastoral church because we are quite simply too big. We are a program church and we need to learn how to become one. That's painful.

I am quite certain we lament when we see the bottom line of our financial statement these days. We have all kinds of questions about why, what can we do to change that. We think if only we could get our numbers up it would be fixed. Maybe, maybe not.

We lament that the church is not the social hub of the community anymore. That's true. We talk a lot about competing with Sunday shopping and Sunday sports but is our faith strong enough for us to say, sorry no shopping today or to tell the coach, I'm sorry we won't be at the game Sunday morning; we go to church as a family.

As one who enjoys being involved in the wider church, I know we are not alone in our lamenting when it comes to the church. We lament at the Presbytery and Conference level too. Our structure does not work as effectively as it did when it was designed. There aren't enough people to do all the work that needs to be done. Budget is always a concern at Conference level and at National level.

You are all probably wondering when she's going to get to the celebration part. Well I think I'm on page seven now so I better do it soon. Earlier I shared the statement "Lament gives birth to praise and renews it."

When we can think and talk about praise we can celebrate and as church we have so much to celebrate. When we can recognize and give voice to where our pain is, where our brokenness is, we can begin to heal. With healing comes energy and enthusiasm to

look to the future, to discern and create a common vision with plans that invite and include participation.

I believe that the New Model of Governance we (I mean us as a congregation because we voted for this) have chosen to enter into is an example of being able to name a place we needed change. It has not been an easy process but I know it is slowly creating energy and enthusiasm. The re-creation of the Stewardship Committee addressed an area of pain and they have done some wonderful work. We have a ways to go yet, we need two more volunteers to round out the committee, but this small group of committed individuals has done wonders in a short period of time.

Our property committee, and we can say wow, is near completing renovations and preparation for the installation of our renewed organ. They are excited and ready to move on and look forward to new projects. Just read their proposal to know that. We have a group of families who have been meeting to create energy and enthusiasm for our Sunday School. One just needed to walk through the church last Sunday and again this Sunday to see the fruits of their work. They are committed along with so many others who offer to lead to give their children, all of our children, opportunities and creative ways to experience God through our biblical story.

These are just a few examples of what we can celebrate. There are many, many others. All of our committees are doing a great job.

To have faith, to be part of a faith community means there are times when we are going to feel pain, times when we will hurt. Some of those times will be because of things that happen in our personal lives. Some of them will be because of things that happen in the church, this congregation and in the wider church. I believe God hurts and feels the pain with us. We need to lament. We need to cry out as Jeremiah did. In time, in time my friends, we get through it to the celebration.

The writer of Timothy invites us to pray for everyone and for me that means everyone in any situation. Pray in the times of lament! Pray in the times of celebration! Nothing can befall us which is beyond the power of God to use for some measure of good. (Romans 8:28)

Amen.