

Welcome

I had the opportunity to hear the 2004 Miss Arizona speak. Her platform was on domestic violence. I spoke with her after the conference and she talked about how she tries to inform Arizona schools that she is willing to visit and speak about domestic violence. She explained that the schools in the well to do neighborhoods would constantly tell her that it is not an issue in their schools. She was disappointed because she knew that it was an issue that goes unnoticed in these upper class communities.

There's no statistic that breaks down physical abuse by an intimate partner in affluent/upper-class communities. The article written by Jeane Macintosh, "Battered-and Wealthy- Wives-Silent victims who think they're alone" published November 2000 in the New York Post explained how upper-class domestic violence is rarely reported and people are conditioned to believe domestic violence is a lower-class issue. Macintosh explains:

"A recent New York City study revealed that spousal abuse by wealthy, powerful men rarely leads to police intervention. Government figures show that only 8 percent of reported domestic-violence attacks come from people with incomes higher than \$75,000. 'These women don't see themselves reflected in the places we normally see domestic violence portrayed, so when they are abused, they believe they're the only ones it's happening to,' says Charlotte Watson, director of New York's Office for Prevention of Domestic Violence."

When we hear about domestic violence, our first impulse is to say, "just leave." But, it is not that easy. In her article, Macintosh goes on to explain reasons domestic violence is so hard to escape, like the need to "keep up appearances," the victim being blamed for the abuse, and how the victim should be a "better wife" to avoid the abuse.

Domestic violence is difficult. Many would say that it's a private issue. Also, people have different beliefs about leaving the situation. It becomes more complex when finances, children, pets, and safety become involved. There may be a need to maintain status in the community. You still have to interact with neighbors, friends, family, and acquaintances. If kids are involved, you need to consider their relationship with the abuser, how they will interact with their friends, family, school, and if they participate in other activities.

Victims feel alone. Their isolation keeps them from making healing choices. Unfortunately, churches don't often provide spaces where victims' cries can be heard. How can we do better? What does it look like to be a church that creates space for those who are suffering? Today, we'll find that choosing to lament together helps us to slow down and listen to the cries of the most vulnerable among us. With that in mind, let's begin by worshiping together.

Message

A lot of us these days feel like Black Sheep - the one who doesn't fit in. It's not that we feel alienated from the larger culture, but from the Church. A lot of the folks who are feeling this sense of isolation, of being the weird one - it's not because of weak faith. It's actually the opposite

We're not drifting or backsliding or wandering from our faith. It's actually our faithfulness to Jesus that's making us feel like outsiders to our own faith. The people who claim to represent Jesus don't actually look very much like him.

[**Timeline**] This is the experience of the prophet Jeremiah. He was the prophet who lived through the Exile -- a collective trauma based on the Babylonians' strategy to distance the people of Israel from their God, land, communities, family, and culture. Sadly, what the people experienced is due to their disobedience and rejection to follow God's covenant.

The people of Israel knew they were not following the covenant they had with God and they were going through the religious motions of worship. The people did not love their neighbors the way God loved them and they ignored major problems occurring in their community. Deeper social issues were continually covered up or overlooked. The people thought it wasn't their problem or responsibility. Idolatry and disobedience to God carried on from generation to generation. One prophet after another said so.

Jeremiah insisted that covenantal faithfulness is connected to community wellness. For Jeremiah, how the people actually lived out their covenant with God matters. He warned again and again that God refused to pretend along with them that they were actually faithful.

Jeremiah reveals that God's people were living an idolatrous lifestyle. Their story - and ours! - is supposed to be rooted in obedience to the one God, YHWH. Their idolatry and human rebellion resulted in separation from God.

By learning how Jeremiah remained faithful in his day, among a faithless people, we hope to learn how God is calling us to live as a Black Sheep church in our day, too.

Today, we're asking a question all us Black Sheep have to face sooner or later: what do we do when it all feels like too much? What do we do when it feels like all we can do is grieve?

Maybe we've reached a point that God is telling us that our social realities do not bear witness of a loving God. Pastor Ashley explained a few weeks ago how we may not always believe and live out that we are loved by God. Yeah, we know God loves us. But, how do we live out the love of God daily in our life?

Maybe we received that call where we were told to bring to light the injustices. But, the church we were part of was like the school administration saying, "no, that issue isn't facing OUR church." Maybe we've also reached a point where you began to grieve injustice and brokenness that is going on. You were marked the black sheep for speaking up. We see that a sign of idolatry

is the cries from the vulnerable and oppressed. This is where lament comes in and brings forward the suffering, hardship, grief. We'll allow for space of lament, so that cries won't be ignored. Sitting in a posture of lament will help us discern how to go forward towards hope in God.

Turn with us to Lamentations (instead of Jeremiah). We're in Lamentations today to see how the people of Israel sat in brokenness. Lamentations is a collection of five poems written after the Exile, by someone who remained among the conquered people of Judah. In fact, a lot of scholars are convinced that none other than Jeremiah is the author of these poems.

So remember... we're reading words directed to a people who spend decades, centuries, rejecting God and God's way. People who were warned time and again that God was going to give them what they wanted by withdrawing God's protection and care.

I'm sure not everyone was this way. I'm sure there were a few good people, families, and maybe some communities. Why should a few bad apples be the basis for judgment of the rest of the community as a whole? The prophet Jeremiah explains that the people of Israel will be judged as a community of the people and religious leaders.

In Lamentations' first song, the people confess their sin and disgrace: they have wandered, they have multiple transgressions, are unclean, they have gone away from God's word, they are rebellious against God; and lastly admit that they have become cruel in Lamentations 4. Guilt becomes a responsive feeling of their sin.

“The Lord is right,’ Jerusalem says, ‘for I rebelled against him.
Listen, people everywhere; look upon my anguish and despair,
for my sons and daughters have been taken captive to distant lands.
‘I begged my allies for help, but they betrayed me.
My priests and leaders starved to death in the city,
even as they searched for food to save their lives.
‘Lord, see my anguish!
My heart is broken and my soul despairs, for I have rebelled against you.
In the streets the sword kills, and at home there is only death. -- Lamentations 1:18-20 (NLT)

It is difficult to admit sin, transgression, and if you have strayed from God. It's probably more difficult to admit to communal or corporate sin. Their social realities did not bear witness to a God who was gracious or loving. Their social realities bore witness to what the world offered and brought them to a crisis point.

Communally, the people of Israel were called to be different and worship only YHWH. YHWH was the people's hope for unity and restoration of earth. True restoration would reveal a new creation of heaven on earth with God's presence. This is our hope as well. We long for unity, renewal, and restoration. Think about the Lord's Prayer - which is the prayer Jesus gave us to teach us to pray: “Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need, and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.” Matthew 6:9-13(NLT)

The language in this prayer is plural. “Our Father,” “Give us,” “Forgive us,” “Don’t let us,” “Rescue us.” Jesus continues the tradition of unity and obedience is necessary to worship God. The unity of the people is the idea of community. The community of the church is also seen as the body of Christ. “All of you together are Christ’s body, and each of you is a part of it.” (1Cor. 12:27) An injury or infection can affect the rest of the body.

I broke my right femur when I was 19 years old. My right leg was in a cast for a couple of months. I was in the Army and physical therapy was limited after the cast was taken off. My right leg still hurt and it was much weaker than my left leg. I began to overcompensate and place most of my weight to my left leg. I ended up fracturing the neck of my left femur. It was an orthopedic surgeon who placed strict limits on my physical activity for me to properly heal and prevent me from having a hip replacement surgery when I was 21.

It took over a year for me to heal. It was a difficult time for me because I loved to run and all I could do was walk. I had to relearn how to walk to distribute my weight evenly on both legs and prevent worsening my injury. I think lamenting is kind of like this. Was it fair to my left leg that my right leg was in a cast? Why couldn’t my left leg just go about its business and ignore the right leg’s pain? It sounds silly to ask it that way, doesn’t it?

But how often do we treat sin like that? If some other part of our corporate body sins, we want to imagine it doesn’t affect me. That I have no responsibility for that sin. But Paul reminds us that we’re all one body. Your sin impacts me, and my sin impacts you. That’s what it means to be a church.

And just like a broken limb, our collective healing takes time. It’s not something we can rush. When we rush healing or don’t fully heal... we hurt ourselves further and it can affect another part of our body. The body of Christ has many parts. If we don’t heal from corporate sin, it will continue to affect the body of Christ - whether I was directly responsible or not.

Lamentations has poetic features that allow for multiple voices and a blend of emotions and imagery. Lamentations 5 is a communal lament that allows space for the people of Israel to express their traumatic grief because individual life is not separate from community life. The people had to take time to heal and unlearn how to walk without injuring their community.

The poetic form of Lamentations allows the people to engage in their own prayer, leaning on the tradition of the lament psalms, but the account of suffering is much longer than what one finds in a lament psalm. The people of Israel, the community, are crying out to God. There is much difficulty which they have gone through. What has befallen them: the city is going through turmoil and then it is destroyed. Families are torn apart during this time of exile, deportation, and military occupation. Let us read the poetic lament of the people who have experienced much sorrow:

‘Joy has left our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning.
The garlands have fallen from our heads. Weep for us because we have sinned.
Our hearts are sick and weary, and our eyes grow dim with tears.

For Jerusalem is empty and desolate, a place haunted by jackals.
But Lord, you remain the same forever! Your throne continues from generation to generation.
Why do you continue to forget us? Why have you abandoned us for so long?
Restore us, O Lord, and bring us back to you again! Give us back the joys we once had!
Or have you utterly rejected us? Are you angry with us still?" -- Lamentations 5:15-22 (NLT)

The hardship, despair, brokenness, and loss the people of Israel speak of in Lamentations can be used to help others lament their traumatic events, sorrow, and loss. The people are allowed to turn to God in prayer and bring voice to their grief. The only voices you hear are of those who grieve and cry out. God does not interrupt or dismiss their suffering.

Lamentations allow for the people of Israel to grieve, their voices to cry out, and create space for them to express their suffering. The process of grief is to create marks of a turning point towards healing and hope. The people are able to come to terms with the trauma, grief, and pain. The person who laments has to speak of their pain. No one can speak on their behalf or tell them how to get over their pain.

A corporate sin that is often dismissed is what happened to Indigenous children, families, and communities at the hands of churches and federal government institutions. More often you hear from Christians that justify this harmful act: "That was an isolated incident." "That priest wasn't a REAL Christian." "I didn't commit that sin, don't blame me or the church I attend." Indians have been killing each other long before white people came here so what does it matter that some died." I could go on and on with the justification I have heard.

This is one example of how an injustice that wasn't spoken up against snowballed into something more harmful. Boarding schools, assimilation policies, child removal policies, Indian removal policies all have had a long standing effect from generation to generation. What if a community spoke up on behalf of the people instead of taking part and now having a brutal legacy. The injustices and unfaithfulness that the people of Israel committed did not happen overnight. It became a systemic issue. The issues hurting Native communities today, like lack of adequate drinking water, lack of nutrition, poor housing, racial segregation, racial prejudice, and so on did not just happen overnight.

A church that refuses to lament can't hear the suffering of Native peoples. A church that rushes to make excuses, that is quick to say, "Not me!" can't hear those hurt in the name of Jesus. Will we be a church who hears the voice of the lost, broken, oppressed? Will our church become a place for God to bring the lived-out hope, healing, renewal and restoration to those who are crying out? If we want that, we have to be willing to lament.

The sociological and cultural injustices the people of Israel endured due to the fall of Jerusalem is expressed in the book of Lamentations. The distance from God is expressed from the people due to the destruction of the temple. Israel is in a state of mourning and cannot rejoice due to the permanence of separation and distance from God because of exile to another country and since there is no temple to praise God. The book of Lamentations recalls the emotional, physical, psychological trauma and the grief they feel. This leads them to lament and appeal to God.

Jeremiah tells the people of a proposal of what the people of Israel's world could be like after exile. What do we imagine the world to be when we live out God's love?