

“What to Say About Grief?”
2 Samuel 1:17-27; Matthew 5:1-9
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 24, 2023
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Scripture: 2 Samuel 1:17-27; Matthew 5:1-9

17 Then David sang this funeral song[a] for Saul and his son Jonathan. 18 David ordered everyone in Judah to learn the Song of the Bow.[b] (In fact, it is written in the scroll from Jashar.)

19 Oh, no, Israel! Your prince[c] lies dead on your heights.[d]

Look how the mighty warriors have fallen!

20 Don’t talk about it in Gath;

don’t bring news of it to Ashkelon’s streets,

or else the Philistines’ daughters will rejoice;

the daughters of the uncircumcised will celebrate.

21 You hills of Gilboa!

Let there be no dew or rain on you,

and no fields yielding grain offerings.[e]

Because it was there that the mighty warrior’s[f] shield was defiled—
the shield of Saul!—never again anointed with oil.

22 Jonathan’s bow never wavered from the blood of the slain,
from the gore of the warriors.

Never did Saul’s sword return empty.

23 Saul and Jonathan! So well loved, so dearly cherished!

In their lives and in their deaths they were never separated.

They were faster than eagles,

stronger than lions!

24 Daughters of Israel, weep over Saul!

He dressed you in crimson with jewels;

he decorated your clothes with gold jewelry.

25 Look how the mighty warriors have fallen in the midst of battle!

Jonathan lies dead on your heights.

26 I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan!

You were so dear to me!

Your love was more amazing to me[g] than the love of women.

27 Look how the mighty warriors have fallen!

Look how the weapons of war have been destroyed!

I've been thinking about this sermon for a while. I've been prepping myself, talking to folks about what they think about grief, their experiences of grieving, how they would preach about grief. I have been like an athlete training for a marathon...stretching my grief-muscles and my comforting-grief-muscles, like I'm practicing for talking about that which is so often unspeakable.

But I found myself at a loss.

Grief does that. It makes us at a loss. Because there has been loss.

My friend, Sam, died this past week. Died far too young, leaving a wife and baby, and many family and friends who will continue to love and remember him for a long time.

So I turned to the poets and artists who share experiences of the deaths of loved ones, depression, mourning, pregnancy loss, disenfranchised grief, trauma survival, and the challenges of aging...and more and more and more.

I turned to *Funeral Blues*, by W.H. Auden:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message 'He is Dead'.
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

To me, this poem echoes the voice of King David in our scripture from 2 Samuel, mourning the former king Saul and his son Jonathan. David thinks of the past, of the victories that were achieved while Saul and Jonathan were full of life and strength...and then he says, "don't talk of this! Let no rain fall and no grain grow...look how the mighty warriors have fallen...I grieve..." The writer of 2 Samuel put words in the mouth of David that show how overcome he was by the

loss of his king and the king's son—of whom David says his love was more wonderful than the love of women. They were very intimate indeed, and David's grief is clear and strong in this lament. I think David would echo Auden in saying “he was my north, my south, my east, my west.” Grief unmoors us, making us feel directionless, like, as the poet says, “nothing now can ever come to any good.”

Lament is real, and raw. And it's hard.

Lament is an important part of life—and an important part of the life of faith. As a Christian, I tend to think that our Jewish siblings are better at lament, and more practiced at making space for grief. There is surely a strong strain of lament throughout the Hebrew scriptures, throughout the psalms and voiced through the hymns of leaders and within the Wisdom literature of Ecclesiastes—there is even a book of the Bible called “Lamentations”!

Within the tradition of lamentation, there are many emotions: grief, anger, fear, frustration, rage, despair, despondency, depression, apathy, numbness...the list goes on. Lamentation as an action makes space for those emotions to get out, and not be trapped inside our hearts, and threaten to consume our very being. When we sit with the pain, the heartbreak, the grief of everyday life, we come into close contact with our humanity in all its varied forms: we are not solely people of positivity or superficial optimism. In all of our human experiences, there is heartache, loss, change, fear, and tragedy. In all of our lives, there will come times when loss is our all-consuming reality.

And in those times, lament can be a tool that we use to go on living, feeling all that we feel and letting our grief accompany us.

Poet Jan Richardson is famous for her poetry of blessing. When her husband Gary died at a young age, she continued to write poetry through her grief, which ultimately became the book “A Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief.” This is one of her poems:

Blessing for the Dailiness of Grief

Sorry I am
to say it,
but it is here,
most likely,
you will know the rending
most deeply.

It will take your breath away,
how the grieving waits for you
in the most ordinary moments.

It will wake
with your waking.

It will
sit itself down
with you at the table,
inhabiting the precise shape
of the emptiness
across from you.

It will walk down the street
with you
in the form of
no hand reaching out
to take yours.

It will stand alongside you
in every conversation,
nearly unbearable
in its silence
that fairly screams.

It will
brush its teeth
with you at night
and climb into bed
with you
when finally
you let go
of this day.

Even as it goes
always with you,
it will still manage
to startle you with
its presence,
causing you to weep
when you enter
the empty kitchen
in the morning,
when you spread fresh sheets
on the bed you shared,
when you walk out
through the door
alone
and pass back through it
likewise.

It is here
you will know it best—
in the moments
that made up the rhythm
of your days,
that fashioned the litany
of your life,
the togetherness
you will never know
in the same way again.

But I will tell you
it is here, too,
that your solace lies.
It will wait for you
in those same moments
that stun you
with their sorrow.

I cannot tell you how,
but it will not cease
to carry you
in the cadence that has
forever altered
but whose echo will persist
with a stubbornness
that will surprise you,
bearing you along,
breathing with you still
through the terrible
and exquisite
ordinary days.

—Jan Richardson

“Terrible and exquisite ordinary days” is about right. Anyone who has experienced grief of any kind knows that feeling of almost forced normality, but then of course the knowledge is there that nothing will feel normal again, in a way.

It is important to note that lament is not only an individual act. Or maybe, it rarely is an individual act. Lament can be done when giving expression to one’s individual grief, but it can also be when a community is crying out, expressing anger and mourning together.

How practiced are you at lament? How do you think we, this congregation, are at practicing lament?

In times of transition and change, which we have been well acquainted with over the past few years, there certainly have been many feelings roiling around inside us, longing for expression. We've weathered a global pandemic, calculating our every move and how we gather and how we protect ourselves and each other from a virus that our political leaders lacked will to deal with completely. We've gone through staffing changes, retirements and resignations and new additions to our congregation's life. We've been facing the huge questions about how best we steward this physical space, what our values would have us do, and how we steward our finances as we consider many options for the future.

With all this going on, at times it may even seem like we feel so much that it is too hard, too scary, too dangerous, to give voice to what we feel, to express ourselves, to let God know that we are struggling...but friends, beloved church, God can handle our feelings. God is big enough, loving enough, strong enough to receive all of our emotions—even the ones that seem too much.

But what happens when we *do not* make space for our grief, when we stuff feelings of anger, fear, sadness down, when we do not allow ourselves to cry out to the Holy with our lamentation?

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote this about what is at stake when there is a lack of attention to lament: “One loss that results from the absence of lament is the loss of genuine covenant interaction because the second party to the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology. Where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a celebration of joy and well-being. Or in political categories, the greater party is surrounded by subjects who are always ‘yes men and women’ from whom ‘never is heard a discouraging word’. Since such a celebrative, consenting silence does not square with reality, covenant minus lament is finally a practice of denial, cover up, and pretense, which sanctions social control.”¹

So let us voice this question: where do we see something that doesn't square with reality, where denial and cover-up and pretense for the sake of social control are running rampant?

For me, I can't help thinking of political reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic. As of this week, there have been over 1.1 million deaths from COVID-19 in the United States. 1.1 million lives, lost, and yet major political and corporate players acted as if their hands were tied, leaving individuals to have to relentlessly calculate the risk of seeing loved ones, working, and going to church? Where is the lament for those 1.1 million people?

What can people of faith share from traditions of lament that could speak into this space? What might change if as a community (from this church to a national community) we held witness for the loss, fear, anger, anxiety, depression and more that have to a great extent been discounted by the powers that be?

¹ 'The Costly Loss of Lament' [*JSOT* (1986) 57-71], Walter Brueggemann

In our Scripture today, David knew something about lament. That the feelings in his heart and the loss in his body had to be voiced. “look,” he said. Not, “look away”-- he said “look!” And with courage in our hearts, let us look at those spaces where there is cause for lament, where it may be invited into our lives as a spiritual practice.

Beloved church, know this:

Grief is not linear. There is no rule-book or guidebook for grief. It might have five steps or eight or twelve or nineteen, but what is clear is that it is a process. Grief will be everyday, in the changes from ideas of what could have been or what might be. But it is not the enemy. The long Biblical tradition of lament shows us that it is a part of life and that God can hold all that lament contains.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus declared, “blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” They will. Their comfort is assured. As is ours. I will, and you will, and we will, learn to live alongside our grief, looking it boldly in the face and inviting it to speak and making space for lamentation. We continue to move forward, trusting God and holding close our community, to meet what comes together.

Let me leave you with this poem: *Let Evening Come* by Jane Kenyon

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to air in the lung
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.