

Hello everyone! And welcome to our Wednesday Word devotion for this week, June 3, 2020! So grateful to have you join us today and spend this time in your day focusing on God and your faith.

This week, I think this is true for many of us, our hearts are extremely heavy, coping with the death of George Floyd, and the protests for racial justice, calling out the sins of systemic racism, on top of an already very challenging time, figuring out life during the covid-19 pandemic. This is a difficult and challenging season of heartache and anger and sorrow, and all the other feelings we bring in our minds, hearts, and bodies. So today seemed like a good day to talk about how we can lean into all these complicated feelings, and what the scriptures and church traditions give us to help in feeling and working through them. Today we are going to talk about lament, and specifically, where lament, Scripture, and community come together.

I think we all need more moments of intentional prayer and reflection these days, so please join me in a word of prayer as we begin our devotion:

Lord God, our hearts are so heavy, with sorrow, heartache, anger, exhaustion, frustration, grief, feeling helpless, nervous, and don't know where to turn. Lord, hear our lamentations. Hear our prayers, spoken aloud and in our minds and hearts and spirits. Hear our cries for justice and safety and life itself. Help us, Lord, to do the challenging work of feeling through our feelings. The only way out is through, and Lord we give you thanks for your assured presence in the midst of these feelings and this emotional work, through your Son Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit, our Advocate who comes alongside us in all things. Come to our aid as we grieve and learn and support all our brothers and sisters in Christ, especially our siblings of color. May your Holy Spirit of love, empowerment, peace, and mercy fill our hearts anew. Help us to bring your reign where all people are heard, valued, and alive even closer. Help us to love you, lean on you, and love our neighbors in all we do. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Dear friends in Christ, let me begin by saying that to lament is to be human. To lament means you feel so deeply that you cannot help but use words and actions to name your pain. To lament means to be called into a heart space of grieving and loss that allows a whole array of feelings to spring forth. To lament is to name the wrong that is happening around you and within you and be deeply sad and angry about the brokenness in our world. As my colleague Pastor Michele Arndt wrote: Lament is the language of suffering. It is bringing our sorrows to God, and grieving together.

Most of us aren't used to this language of suffering. We talk about grieving, we pray for people who are hurting, suffering, and struggling, but oftentimes we struggle to know what to say or do when folks are lamenting.

When words are beyond us or fail us, one of the best things to do is lean on the Word of God, and immerse ourselves in the Scripture. And as we've been talking about for the last few weeks, truly no human experience is left untouched in the Scriptures. Lament is everywhere - an entire

book called Lamentations is just one example. And in the Psalms, there are as many psalms of lament as there are psalms of praise. Certainly our spiritual forebears had reasons to lament too, situations of slavery and war and violence and prejudice and discrimination and sickness and destruction and lots of other painful situations. Their words assure us that we are not alone, that even though God may feel far away sometimes that God is faithful to His promises to never abandon or forsake us. The words of our forebears provide us with insight, comfort, and solidarity.

But as we lean on the Scripture to help us and provide words for us in our lament, I want to note something powerful. For as much as we talk about God's grace, mercy, love, and the joy of new life, which are beautiful and crucial parts of our faith, there are no books in the Bible with those titles. The names of the Scriptures instead reflect the human people involved in the stories. We name some authors, like John and Luke in the Gospels, we name some prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and we name communities of people where they are, like the Corinthians and Romans in the ancient cities of Corinth and Rome, respectively.

The titles reflect the human experience of and with the divine, rather than what we gain from our divine God. I'll say that again. The books of the Bible reflect the human experience of and with the divine, rather than what we gain from the divine. It is in living through the human experience, being in relationship with God, learning about and from our spiritual forebears, and being in relationship with our fellow humans that we learn about our divine God. It's about relationships, not a transaction or checklist. Relationships are messy and grow and change and are centered much more in being alive than in the static nature of a transaction. That growth and change is scary, but it is what keeps us alive. What we can rely on, what is static in nature, is God's love and promises and presence in our lives. God in the Holy Spirit comes alongside us and God chooses us, to death on the cross and back to life again.

God chooses to be in relationship with us, and we live into this relationship with our Creator through worship, prayer, Scripture, meditation, reflection, cooking, serving, showing up, the whole array of possibilities of whatever makes us feel most alive and nourished. We receive these gifts of love, grace, mercy, joy, and abundant new life only and first because of God's love, God's choice to be in relationship with us. So any sort of difficulty or challenges we have in our human relationships must first begin by centering our own selves on God, who teaches us what it is to be in relationship, no matter what we do or say or look like or don't do or anything else. That is the love for neighbors we strive for. We must work on our own selves and perspectives with the help and grace of God.

And the first step in working on our own selves is to name what is going on within us. This whole conversation and experience of lament is rooted in our humanness, the beauty and brokenness of it. As the first step in twelve step programs says, we can only work on solving a problem by first naming the problem. We have problems in our community that we need to work on and through. Our siblings of color suffer in many ways disproportionately to white folks. This includes situations of police violence, like George Floyd's death, yes, and also things like education

achievement, access to healthcare, housing, and a host of other things necessary for survival. The way that we can best show up and love these neighbors is, of course, tangible action, but we must first do the work of lamenting this brokenness in our world. In our process of lamenting, it is of crucial importance to name our feelings, our reactions, really figure out where we are at. As we understand our own feelings and reactions, we then can begin the work of learning more about these problems in our world, particularly by listening to our siblings of color. My personal commitment these days is to read books and articles and listen to podcasts and videos published by authors, hosts, and artists of color so I can truly listen and learn more about their human experiences, and how best to come alongside our black, brown, and indigenous siblings in Christ.

Even in this personal, internal work, though we need not be alone. We need relationships with our fellow humans in order to really process our reactions and feelings, and it is in the strength of community that we grow as people. And these relationships with one another can (and do!) look lots of different ways.

Lament is a communal state as well as a personal state. When we read the book of Lamentations, for example, it is one author's poetry and grief and pain about the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. But Jerusalem is a city full of people, tons of people have been displaced and persecuted and harmed and are grieving the loss of this holy city and temple. There is a community of people who join in this mourning and lamenting, and the author speaks of and to the community of which they were a part. One person's perspective provided thousands of years of people with insight on what happened. One person's poetry gave people comfort and solidarity in their feelings and experiences. So yes, the person has power to make a difference. A single person is important. And, it is ultimately the community of faith, the communion of saints passed before us, that made this poetry available to us.

So friends, I encourage you to not ignore the lamentations of our hearts, our communities, our country. Lean into this language of suffering and listen to our brothers and sisters who cry for justice, and the powerful peace that comes alongside and after justice. Though lament is hard, and it can feel like we are alone, we are never truly alone. We are part of a community who laments and grieves and angers and prays together. As I said on Sunday, we will not overcome the tragedies of our time by dwelling in differences. We will only be stronger together, as one common humanity, one body of Christ together called to bring love into this world. By learning, listening, and lamenting, we are loving our neighbors in Christ.

And though it may seem like God may be far away at times during this process, God comes alongside us, in and through all things. So I invite you to join me in dwelling in this Scripture, from Psalm 22. Psalm 22 provided the words that Jesus spoke as he died on the cross "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?". These words begin this psalm, of both lament and trust that God is present. I will read verses 14-28:

I am poured out like water,

and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;
I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.

But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
Save me from the mouth of the lion!

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
For dominion belongs to the Lord,

and God rules over the nations.

The Word of the Lord.

So, my dear sisters and brothers in Christ, the spiritual practice this week I would love for you to do is rooted in the holy practices of curiosity and lament. Ask yourself some questions and spend time in personal reflection and examination. Ask yourself - what is my reaction to the death of George Floyd and the protests around our country? What feelings are coming up for me? What am I lamenting these days? Take time to really consider what is going through your mind and your spirit and is on your heart in light of these events. Take time to lament and grieve and get angry and process and weep if you need to.

If you are just beginning and the work of naming your feelings and reactions is a lot for you right now, that's okay. Any work towards understanding something new or from a new perspective begins with understanding our own feelings and experiences and that can take time to process. But during this time of reflection and processing, you may also get to a point of "what do I do now?" and a desire to learn more.

A great place to start if you'd like to be in conversation about race and justice is the book "Waking Up White" by Debby Irving. The synod is holding a book club conversation on this book at the end of the month, June 29, via Zoom, so that would be a great space to reflect and read, and as the subtitle of the book says, "Finding Myself in the Story of Race". I'll post that information in this video's information. I ordered this book last night and will be participating in that discussion on June 29. Also, if you would like guidance for a more prayerful time of lament, please check out the video of our community prayer and lament service from this past Sunday. If you click the event link on our Facebook page it will take you to the video link on The Crossing Covenant Church's website. My colleagues Pastor Michele Arndt and Pastor Kendra Grams provided powerful leadership in this service.

If you would like to be in conversation with me about anything related to lament or racial justice or coming together as community, or would like other resources as we learn and listen, please do not hesitate to reach out. I continue to hold our community and our neighbors in Minneapolis and St. Paul in prayer as we navigate difficult times and change together.

As we end our time today, dear friends in Christ, let us join together in community as we pray the words our Lord Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever and ever, Amen.

Thank you for tuning in today. May peace and health be with you all. Amen.