

“Lament and Love” by Deborah SokoLove

October 16, 2016



Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

This is a very hard time of year for me. As I was preparing this sermon for what is, in many ways, the most important day of our life together as a church, Recommitment Sunday, I was simultaneously aware of being in exile from a community in which I spent the first forty-two years of my life. I didn't always observe the rules and regulations, I wasn't always a member of a congregation, but until my baptism, I always knew that I was welcome to participate whenever and however I wanted to. When I became a Christian, I knowingly and willingly put myself outside of that community. This Wednesday, I did not spend Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, fasting among my people. Although I no longer chant a long list of sins, beat my breast, and sing "ve'al kulam, eloha s'lichot. Selach lanu, mechol lanu, kaper lanu" these words are written on my heart. For all our sins, O God of Forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

Instead, on that day I was on my way to San Antonio to meet with a group of representatives of a number of Christian seminaries. We were there to make decisions about a joint project called the Hispanic

Summer Program. This is an opportunity for Latino/a theology students from all over the country to spend two weeks learning from professors who share their heritage, as a respite from their experience of exile while studying in mostly Anglo schools. It is an honor a privilege to represent my school on the Board of Directors, and I was very glad to be there.

And so it is with both longing for a community that is no longer mine, and gratitude for one that is, that I stand before you today, an exile who has been adopted into a new family.

A few minutes ago, most of us stood to affirm our relationship with Seekers, a Christian community in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour, linked with the people of God through the ages. Some of us then remained standing to repeat our commitment as a Steward, promising to:

- • Be a faithful witness to God's presence among us;
- • Nurture my relationship with God and Seekers Church through specific spiritual practices or disciplines;
- • Care for the whole of creation, beginning with the natural environment;
- • Foster justice and be in solidarity with the poor;
- • Work for the ending of all war, public and private;
- • Share responsibility for the spiritual growth of persons of all ages in the Seekers Church community;
- • Take responsibility for the organizational health of Seekers Church;
- • Respond joyfully with my life, as the grace of God gives me freedom.

What we didn't promise is what both Marjory, two weeks ago, and John, last week, both said that they were hoping for – that, as individuals with no children or other family to look after them if they became incapacitated, Seekers would do so. Seekers, each of them said, IS their family.

Marjory and John are not the only ones who feel that way. As I look

out across the congregation, I see many who have no partners, no nearby children, no family member that they can depend on if they fall ill. And even for those, who, like me, have a partner as well as close and loving relationships with children and grandchildren, Seekers is more than a group of individuals who happen to be in the same place at the same time on Sunday mornings. This church, this congregation, this small part of the Body of Christ, has become my home. And, like Marjory and John, I'm not going anywhere. I hold onto this church like a lifeline, like a life raft in a stormy sea. Although we don't explicitly promise to take care of one another in material, physical ways, I trust that you will help me when I need you, just as I will do what I can when you are in need. These promises are not written into our commitment statement, but they are written on our hearts.

This must have been how the early followers of Jesus felt. Many of them had left their families, their farms and towns and villages, even their sources of livelihood, in order to follow the one whom they called Teacher. They travelled together, walking all over the countryside, sharing whatever they had. Together, they stopped where Jesus stopped; listened to him when he spoke; prayed with him and for him. Together, they tried to understand his paradoxical, seemingly nonsensical sayings, believing that when they were with him, somehow they were in the presence of God. And when he died on the cross, they were bereft, until they realized that somehow he was not in that grave they had put him in. Somehow, he was still with them, whenever and wherever they gathered together.

And, somehow, he is here among us, too, especially when we gather to sing and pray and share the great story that is our heritage. The last few weeks, we've been reading about the prophet, Jeremiah, which is from that portion of the great story that Christians call the Hebrew Scriptures, and which I grew up calling, simply, the Bible.

Jeremiah lived about six centuries before the birth of Jesus. The son of one of the hereditary priests, he was called to the role of prophet, which cannot be inherited and stands outside of all hierarchies. As a prophet, Jeremiah reminded his people of the One God who had made covenant with those who counted Abraham and Sarah, Moses

and Miriam as their spiritual ancestors. Over and over, Jeremiah saw the king and other leaders ignoring God's teachings of fairness, honesty, and integrity. Instead, they used falsehood and slander to get whatever they wanted; oppressed foreigners, orphans and widows; and abused others to show how powerful they were. Jeremiah reminded them that God had promised to bless them if only they would remain faithful to the disciplined life in community that their ancestors had learned during their long sojourn in the desert. If they refused to live according to the rules of mutual respect and communal responsibility that were recorded in the story of their escape from slavery in Egypt, Jeremiah warned that dire consequences would follow.

Despite Jeremiah's warnings, the king and his cronies went on living as they pleased, worshipping false gods and destroying the fabric of the community. Eventually Jerusalem was overrun by the Babylonian army. Jeremiah watched and lamented as many were killed, and many others of his people were taken captive, dragged into exile from the land they had inhabited for generations. A few weeks ago, we read his cry, "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for my poor people." [Jeremiah 9:1]

Jeremiah's lament echoes loudly in my mind these days. I worry about our country, as the presidential rhetoric grows increasingly ugly. I worry about my family in England, where the economy wobbles in the wake of Brexit, and racist, nativist rhetoric seems to be growing just as it is here. I worry about my family in France, where anti-Semitism has never really gone away, and synagogues and other places where Jews gather are regularly patrolled by armed guards, in the hopes of protecting the people from violence. And I worry about my family in Israel, which seems to be getting more and more hawkish by the minute, doing everything it can to alienate the Palestinians with whom they claim to want peace. And that's just my family worries.

Every day in this country there seems to be a new outrageous incident of police killing some unarmed Black person, as if they somehow haven't heard that Black Lives Matter. Every day, there is a new photo of carnage and destruction in Aleppo; of explosions and bloodied

bodies in Afghanistan; of flooded streets and flattened buildings in Haiti; of refugees drowning or starving or living in squalor; of earthquakes and fires and mudslides and starvation somewhere in the world.

And every day I hear from people I know and love – students, colleagues, friends, family – about the private hells that they live in – depression, anxiety, addiction, fear, domestic abuse, illness, divorce, poverty, grief.

I can't keep track of all the stories, all the names, all the terror, all the bloodshed, all the anguish. I can only cry with the prophet, "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes of fountain of tears. I would weep day and night for my poor people."

But, of course, neither Jeremiah nor I can lament forever. Jeremiah trusted God's promise not to abandon the people who were paying the price for their leaders' idolatrous selfishness. Last week, we heard part of his encouraging letter to the exiles, telling them to build houses, to plant trees and gardens, to marry and have children and grandchildren. In other words, to go on living the best lives that they could, even in a place where everything – from language to food to clothing and customs – was different from what they had known at home. Pray for the good of your captors, Jeremiah said, and seek their welfare. Actually, the word we translate as "welfare" here is shalom, which means not just welfare, or even peace, but wholeness. Seek the wholeness of the city, for in its wholeness, you will find your own. [Jeremiah 29:5-7]

Jesus tells us the same thing: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." [Luke 6:27-28] It sounds counter-intuitive. It sounds impossible. If I am right and they are wrong, why should I pray for them?

And yet...what I know from experience is that if I pray for the person who has wronged me, for the one who irritates me, for the one who is always rude and hateful, the situation will change. Whenever I am

tempted to add to the anguish of the world by responding with anger and retaliation, Jesus invites me to choose the reign of God. And in God's kingdom, miracles can and do happen.

For many years, it has been my practice to pray for any person from whom I have become estranged. Sometimes, that person has done something to hurt me. Sometimes, I have done something that hurt them. Most often, there was plenty of blame to go around. As I like to say, all of us have an infinite capacity to act like a jerk.

Regardless of who is to blame, I believe that it is my responsibility, as one who has committed to follow Jesus, to choose to live in the reign of God, that promised future which is always present whether we see it or not. And when I do that, when I pray honestly and regularly for the person with whom I am at odds, a miracle eventually happens, and something shifts between us. Sooner or later, the reign of God breaks through, and both of us can see one another with compassion. I can't explain it. I can only say that it works.

Today's passage continues Jeremiah's attempt to comfort his people. He says,

The days are surely coming, says the Holy One, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their spouse, says the Holy One. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Holy One: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Holy One," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Holy One; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. [Jeremiah 31:31-34]

Every time I read this passage, I am struck by its astonishing inclusiveness. Everyone, God promises, from the least to the great,

will be in direct contact with the Divine. In a time when all of society was rigidly organized with the king on top; widows, orphans, and foreigners at the bottom; and everyone else immutably fixed in their place in the hierarchy, this text speaks of a time when God's Word, God's love, will be available to everyone, regardless of their status. In a time when religious experience was controlled by a hereditary priesthood, Jeremiah proclaims a vision of unmediated access to the Divine.

This, I think, is what Jesus was talking about, too. In today's puzzling Gospel reading, Jesus seems to compare God to an unjust judge who gives in to an old woman not because her cause is just, but because she repeatedly pesters him in the middle of the night. So, Jesus tells us, "Will not God grant justice to the chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will the Holy One delay long in helping them? I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them." What a strange story, if we try to understand it as telling us something about God. Is God, then, an unjust judge who needs to be pestered to do the right thing? I don't think so.

In Luke's account, it seems that the point here is not so much about the nature of God, but about our calling as humans, as followers of Jesus, to be committed to the welfare of the world. Jesus here is pointing us back to our own actions, our own faith. He asks, "And yet, when the Human One comes, will he find faith on earth? [Luke 18:7-8] When we face ourselves honestly, do we live in prayerful faith that God will, as is promised in Revelation, make all things new?"

Is God's law written on our hearts? Are we really committed to the healing of the world? Can we love our enemies and pray for their wholeness? Can I love the unjust judge at the same time that I am pounding on his door, insisting on justice? Can I pray for the well-being of the person who is dropping bombs on innocent children, for a person who is beating someone up because of the color of their skin or their expression of gender or some other difference, for a person who wants to break up families because some members were born in this country and some in another? Can I love those who spread hatred and rage?

The only answer I have is the one that both Jeremiah and Jesus give us, the law of love that God wants to write on our hearts. There is no other way, because I am committed to follow Jesus. As I follow Jesus, my heart breaks open, and I become able to receive the law of love. Amen.