

"The Lenten Discipline of Lament" by Jesse Palidofsky

The Lenten Discipline of Lament
Palidofsky

Jesse

[A sermon outline]

Today I'll be speaking of the Biblical tradition of *Lament*

And why it is important that we practice the discipline of Lament during the Lenten season

I. Twenty years ago

A. Attended a black church in Philly

1. With African American jazz musician friend Jeremiah

B. I experienced something that has stayed with me

1. to this day

C. Early in service

1. quartet of elderly black men

A. Got up and sang acappella

1 spir'l that must have come from days of slavery

B. Deep and mournful

C Put chills down my spine

D. At same time

1. Members of congreg'n came up around altar

A. knelt

B. or prostrated themselves on floor

2. Moaned

A. let out their tears

3. For loved ones who had died

A. for their sorrows and griefs

E. . The rest of the congreg'n then sang a hymn

1. While these 4 or 5 people took their time

A. Up at the "mourners bench"

F. I was deeply moved!

1. In my 18 years as a chaplain

2. I have experienced a lot of grieving

A. Never anything quite like that

B. A time for communal lament

1. Not at a funeral

2. But built right into the weekly Sunday worship experience

3. Something incredibly freeing about this!

II. I've been the home hospice chaplain for Holy Cross Hospice

A. 2 years now

1. Traveling to people's homes in P.G. & Montgomery counties

B. Providing spiritual support

1. For terminally ill folks/ families

C. Often deeply moving work

1. A privilege to companion folks

A. At this moment in their lives

D. I'm privileged to hear many amazing stories

1. And to minister-and be ministered to- in the depths

E. One of biggest learnings for me has been

A. The importance of **Lament**

1. Bringing the naked rawness of who we are

A. To our Creator and Sovereign

B. And the healing that can come from that level of honesty

III. In the Catholic Church that I grew up in

A. One would fear being struck dead

1. If one dared to speak so honestly

A. Complaining to God not allowed!

B. And yet the Hebrew Scriptures, our OT

1. are full of examples

C. In fact: biblical scholars say that the *lament* is

1. The most common form of prayer in the OT!

D. Nearly 40% of the Psalms

1. Fall into the category of what might be considered to be the “difficult” psalms

A. Whining

 Complaining

 Challenging of God

E. This kind of prayer can be jarring to our modern sensibilities

1. Perhaps even embarrassing to us

A. Espec’y the vindictive psalms

I. Imploring God to smash the heads of our enemies/their children!

IV. Modern Protestants don’t respond well to this rude/uncouth language

A. In fact: Revised Common Lectionary

1. Has fairly well excised these “difficult”/lament psalms

A. From our lectionary & from our communal worship life!

B. Or, when they do appear, they have been “cleaned up”

C. For instance, next week’s readings include

1. Ps 22

A. Which Jesus quotes from the cross

1. "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me"

2. And yet: we are instructed to read only the last 1/3 of this psalm

A. Where the psalmist is praising God

B. Missing entirely the raw passion and struggle

1. The cries of pain

Anger

Alienation

2. The demands upon God

D. These Laments were part of the Hebrew Liturgy

1. The communal prayer of the Jewish people

E. They could be **rude** at times

1. And yet: Our Hebrew forbears knew:

A. As Rabbi Jesus himself did

1. Doubt is **not** the opposite of faith

2. Questioning and wrestling w/ God **NOT** faithless behaviour!

A. Rather: **Despair** is the opposite of faith-giving up,
1. Distancing ourselves

2. refusing to keep in relationship

V. OT scholar Walter Brueggemann says

A. "Our life of faith consists of 3 part dance with God in terms of

A. Being securely **oriented** (Our lives flowing smoothly)

B. To becoming painfully **disoriented**

-w/ regard to :

Self acceptance

Relationships

Vocation

Our relation to wide world

C. To thirdly, Being surprisingly **reoriented**

1. Brought to a new place we could not have imagined

A. Thru the grace of God

B. It is natural for us to move thru this cycle

-orientation—*Psalms of Praise*

-disorientation—*Psalms of Lament/Struggle*

-re

orientation—*Psalms of Praise*-for being saved from the pit

from our deepest struggles

D. Myth of middle/upper middle class America

1. Orientation/ security should be the norm, the constant

2. In the most powerful nation in the world.

A. We should be able to control our lives

1. So that

orientation is the constant

E. Obviously– This is not true!

F.. Brueggemann goes on to say: *“It is a curious fact that the church insists on singing songs of orientation in its worship, songs (that are upbeat and positive) in a world increasingly experienced as disoriented”*

G. Ross Bartlett (United Church of Canada)

1. Communal Lament form can move us beyond detachment

A. Beyond “guilt of privilege”

2. When we hear of horrible pain & disaster in the world

A. Beyond immediate response of resentment

“Why are you telling me this?”

” What can I do about it?”

3. Communal Lament moves us into solidarity

A. Experiencing God’s presence *with* those suffering

4. As we experienced this morning as Elise lit the “peace and Justice” candle

and held up in prayer those working for justice throughout the world

H. Theologian Gayle Ramshaw says that

1. *In times such as ours, joy as our perpetual emotive stance is "naive or selfish or fraudulent" because "secret sorrow, massive injustice and the experience of abandonment are everywhere".*

VI. If there is any time in the church calendar

A. Where we should be utilizing the lament trad'n

1. It is in the season of LENT

B. In our reading today from Mark, Jesus goes immediately from his baptism by John to an incredibly intense time of 40 days in the desert

1. Living with the wild beasts,

2. Being tempted by Satan

3. This represents profound **disorientation!**

C. And the journey to Golgotha

1. Is an experience of gutwrenching disorientation and the deepest grief

A. For the whole Jesus movement

B. Before the profound **reorientation**/transformation

1. Of the Resurrection

D. Jesus quotes Ps. 22 from the cross

1. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me"?

A Psalm of the rawest pain

E. I have found this Lament trad'n to be crucial

1. In my work with hospice patients!

A. If Jesus felt this kind of abandonment

1. It is of the utmost humanity to question God!

To cry out from the depths

F. My work as hospice chaplain

1. And my own faith journey

2. Invites me to see Lent thru new prism

F. Going DOWN

into the muck of soul work

G. Whereas religion of my childhood stressed *transcendence* of pain/grief

1. The journey to *mountaintop*

H. Franciscan Richard Rohr speaks about "*Spir'ity for 2nd Half of Life*"

1. Spirit journey of first half of life-an upward, transcendent journey

I. 2nd half of life= Soul journey -a journey **down** thru the depths to Resurrection

1. Very different journey from the transcendent!

J. This soul journey parallels Jesus journey:

1. Last week we read of Jesus on mountaintop for his *Transfiguration*

2. Now he is beginning the movement **down**

A. the soul journey to Golgotha!

Singing of Ps. 13 “How Long Will This Pain Go On, Lord?”

VII. Kevin

A. African American in his late 40's

1. Career military –Married at a later age

A. 7 year old daughter

2. His cancer has come back

A. He's lost a lot of weight

3. Hospital bed in his living room

A. He's in a fair amount of pain

1. Off and on

B. Or he's “out of it” w/ pain meds

B. Always puts up a good face

1. “I'm going to beat this, w/ the Lord's help”

A. Very involved w/ his church and its men's group

2. They have come out a number of times to pray

3. Courageously upbeat for wife and kids

C. And yet: Underneath, very depressed and scared

1. Hard to reach him in that place

D. Kevin liked music a lot-blues, jazz, spirituals

1. I tried a few things out

A "Sitting On Dock of the Bay"

B "I Want Jesus To Walk With Me"

2. Then I tried this setting of Psalm 13

E . This Psalm of lament, "How Long Will This Pain Go On, Lord"?

1. Musical setting came to me on silent retreat at Dayspring

2. This lament gave Kevin permission to begin speaking his truth

A. Move beyond "stiff upper lip"

1. Of male conditioning

3. And to "Jiggle" his theo'l belief, as well

A. "If I let God know how I'm feeling...

1. God will think me unfaithful"

A. " I will not be physically healed

1. Because of my questioning”

F. Began a dialogue...

1. Opened a space for healing

A. That may not have been physical

1 Yet deeply hungered for-

A. By him and his wife...

2. Whom he was shutting out at the end of his life

VII. Last week David Lloyd reminded us of the Lenten call to **repentance**

A. Personally and communally as a church

B. I'm intrigued by the words of U. Methodist Bishop Kenneth Carder

1. Teaches at Duke Divinity School

C. *“The process of Lament can **pave the way** for repentance, renewal & restoration. As the triumphant Alleluia of Easter is preceded by the tormented lament of Good Friday, so are our exalted praises often forged on the anvil of lament”*

D. ***Often *lament precedes repentance*

Just as *disorientation precedes orientation*

E. As with Kevin, lament led to a deep change of heart, and a reconnection with his wife

VIII. Seekers does better than most churches

A. The depth of intimacy

1. Mission groups and spir'l autobiographies provide...

A. Allow our communal prayers to go deep!

B. Liturgies prepared by Celebration Circle that delve into darkness as well as light...

1. Most American churches stuck in 1st half of life

2. Unwilling to look at issues of mortality

C. Seekers is a "2nd half of life church"

IX.. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel

A. Tells a powerful and even shocking story linking *Lament & Repentance*

B. Story of Rabbi Levi Ytzhak

1. Rabbi in Lithuania during a time of horrible pogroms

A. Against the Jews

C. On the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur

1. The day of atonement

2. Levi Ytzhak gets up in synagogue

3. Raises his fist and says

D. "God, we have repented for our sins-

1. "When are you going to repent for yours?"

E. Wiesel goes on to say:

1. In Jewish trad'n this is NOT blasphemy

2. When one is crying out to God for the needs of the community

A. This is maintaining the relationship w/ God

and therefore totally acceptable

F. When I encountered this story I was 3rd year of seminary at Earlham.School of Religion

1. In Indiana

G. This might sound strange

1. But my honest response was:

2. "If you can talk to God like that,

Maybe I can believe in God"

H. At some basic level I had shut out God— Did not believe my whole being was acceptable

1. My raw feelings of anger and questioning God

2. I found it liberating to contemplate that God is wanting me to be real

A. Not just nicey-nice and polite

I. In my family of origin -with issues of depression

1. There was a **fear** of Lament

2. Fear of “getting stuck” in the muck

J. And yet-like the Gospel itself

1. It's counterintuitive

K. Going down into the muck

1 . Led me to Joy/Freedom

L. I wonder if much of the ***Victim behaviour*** that is so prevalent in our society

1. is not, in fact grieving that has not been completed

A. Grief that has gotten stuck

M. Grieving w/o the healing power of community

1. and the communal crying out to God

2. A society that refuses to grieve spawns many victims

X. Lyn Fraser's wonderful book

Prayers From the Darkness: The Difficult Psalms

A. Kate Cudlipp's college classmate

B. Very powerful examples of use of lament psalms

1. In pastoral care w/ those in severe states of disorientation

C. Part'ly powerful story of a hospital chaplain

1. working w/ a victim of rape

a. and how the recitation of vindictive psalm 58

"O God break the teeth in their mouths

Tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord

2. Helped this woman to begin her process of healing

b. To stay connected rather than withdrawing into

a shell

D. Another example of **Lament** preceding *metanoia*

XI. Finally, I'd like us to reflect upon David Lloyd's excellent Lenten queries for us from last week:

A. *"Our challenge is to rethink our life together:*

-Develop insight

-Figure out where Seekers might have gone wrong

And turning back to the right path as a congregation

Letting go of things that hold us back from God's path for us.

And letting God heal them.

- 1. Of what does our congreg'n need to be healed?**
- 2. Of what are we, as a congreg'n, guilty?**
- 3. What cleansing of us needs to be done?**

B. I'd like to add a few questions of my own:

.In light of Kenneth Carder's belief that so often *Lament* precedes *Repentance*

1. I am led to wonder: Might there be anything I (as individual) or we as a congreg'n need to *Lament together*?

2. Keeping in mind that grief is not a rational feeling w/ linear process or timetable (It could even pertain to an event from 20 or more years ago) : Are there places at which I/we grieve as a community? Are there members of our community of whom I/we still grieve the loss?

3. Might there be some place I/we distance myself /ourselves from Seekers? Places I refuse to speak my pain and my doubts-rather than openly lamenting & speaking my truth, and therefore staying in relationship?

3. Might there be any places where I/we feel upset or angry with God? Whether it is rational or irrational?

XII.Walter Brueggemann reminds us- There is natural human inclination to *reassure*

A. ***Tone down*** the negative/hyperbole

1. Just as our churches edit “unacceptable” psalms

B. He goes on to remind us that we need to avoid this tendency at all costs!

1. *“There can be no newness until a serious death of the old*

There can be no newness without lament!

C. The Psalm form teaches us: The implicit trust that change will occur while voicing our deepest pain...

1. But: Don't go too quickly to resolution/healing/new orientation

A. The courage it takes to walk in the desert of disorientation

D. Brueggemann *“Israel knew that vigorous, even strident grieving was an act of faithfulness. But it's also crucial to note: The object of loss, finally, NOT the focus*

The focus was Relationship w/ God! And :Laments Form virtually always Ends with Praise of God!

Closing Prayer

Thank you God for the gift of this day!

Thank you for the gift of each and every one of us!

Thank you for the blessings I receive from being a member of Seekers Church, and for the fact that I was able to leave and come back to this community.

Thank you for the stewards of this community, the servant leadership team, and all who hold the center of our community life together.

Thank you for the time of communal retreat and renewal we have planned in two weeks.

Bless us and keep us as we prepare for this special time together, that your Spirit may move freely and unexpectedly among us.

In Jesus name we pray it,

AMEN