



November 29, 2016

*feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)*

Dearest Church family,

When we examine the scriptures referencing the giving of thanks it can seem an impossible task. As Stuart summarized it a few years ago, scripture exhorts us to "give thanks for everything, for everyone, in every circumstance, in every word and deed and at every moment." The huge question about this command arises in times when everything seems to be going amiss, prayers are not answered, and despair is all consuming. Give thanks then? Is it possible to do in a sincere and honest way? As a potential answer to my quest, Stuart also mentioned during that sermon a phrase I wish to explore more, "Thanksgiving is a response to what is poured forth and cried out in lament." Might lament be the vessel between the pain and God allowing me to arrive at a place of thanksgiving? What does lament even mean? And knowing what it means, how do I express it? And how is it different from worldly sorrow, or grumbling or complaining?

Dr. Dan Allender, a prominent Christian therapist, in a short article titled "The Hidden Hope of Lament" questions whether part of the current frenzy towards counseling today is because we have not given room to express lament. He argues that we must "learn to lament in worship and prayer, both publicly and privately if our passion for God is to grow." Dr. Allender describes and distinguishes lament from grumbling in this, "It is passion to ask, rather than to rant and rave with already reached conclusions. A lament uses the language of pain, anger, and confusion and moves toward God." "A grumbler", he says, "has already reached a conclusion, shut down all desire and postures with questions that are barely concealed accusations."

For us today, it would seem we have been trained more as grumblers and complainers. So, for me, to lament I need to break habits of complaining and learn the language of lament which expresses anger, pain and confusion to God, but in a posture which still asks, seeks and knocks in the process. Scripture is full of examples of lament, most notably the Psalms, but on Sunday I explored the laments of Habakkuk, Jonah and Jesus. Habakkuk is lamenting on behalf of his nation and people, tutoring us with the language and posture of intensely searching for God amid his expressed anger, pain, and confusion. As a result of his lament (1:2-4; 1:13-17), still in the midst of his troubling circumstances, Habakkuk moves towards a space in which he is able to more clearly see God and rejoice in that revelation (3:16-19).

Jonah's situation is slightly different in that his lament comes because of the consequences of his own sin and the justified wrath of God against him. This does not, however, seem to exclude Jonah from his freedom to lament. His prayer in chapter 2, is often referred to as a prayer of thanksgiving, but to me you cannot miss the pain and anguish that comes through in Jonah's expression. God does not silence Jonah from his need to lament the pain of the consequences of his actions. In fact, I suspect in His mercy God longs for us to feel the depths of the lament as a consequence to sin, as then we can respond with Jonah, "Salvation comes from the Lord!" (2:9).

During this first week of Advent, our meditations take us to the prophetic declaration of the death and resurrection of our Immanuel, as revealed in the Old Testament. Psalm 22 is among the meditations, as referenced by Jesus upon the cross – the lament of all laments – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The Psalm continues with cries of pain, anguish and petition

and yet again, finds its rest with the declaration, "in the congregation I will praise you...For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one" (vs. 22-23). This all calls to mind the great declaration of Jesus, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). Do we give ourselves or others permission to mourn, that we might get to a place of being comforted, and thus able to make our way to a place of thanksgiving and praise?

We closed our service with a few opportunities to respond in prayer, testimony, and song. It is a challenge to express lament corporately in some sense, as we still have so far to go in learning to express lament even in the safety of our own souls. One congregant also presented a means of helping us write our own laments, based on the compositions we see in scripture. If you or a loved one might need some assistance in finding your own language of lament, maybe this can be a tool to that end.

Laments can have seven parts:

1. Address to God
2. Review of God's faithfulness in the past
3. The complaint
4. A confession of sin or claim of innocence
5. A request for help
6. God's response (often not stated)
7. A vow to praise, statement of trust in God

Not all parts are present in each lament, and they are not always in the same order. Laments allow persons to fully express their grief, and even accuse God, but are quickly followed by a statement of trust in God. This combination makes for very powerful prayers. The grief is not hidden, but the person does not stay in grief—he or she calls on God and expresses faith in him. The laments encourage people to be honest with God, to speak the truth about their feelings and doubts. (Excerpted and condensed from the book *Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help*, by Wycliffe missionaries Margaret Hill, Harriet Hill, Richard Bagge' and Pat Miersma.)

My hope on Sunday was first to acknowledge and give thanks that we serve a God who can sympathize with our weaknesses and encourages us to boldly approach His throne in our times of need (Hebrews 4: 14-16)! Sometimes our need comes amid grave anger, pain and confusion as we desperately search for the grace and mercy needed to make it through. Additionally, it was my desire to give some language and permission to the fact that lament is intended to be a part of our drawing close to God as we walk through a life full of suffering and challenges. And lastly, that we would grow in our ability to assist others in their seasons of lament, aiding us all in our ability to respond as scripture exhorts "to give thanks at all times"!

With a thanksgiving lament,  
Monique