

Lamentation and Hope

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

October 6, 2019 (World Communion Sunday)

Lamentations 1:1-6, Psalm 137, II Timothy 1:1-14

Have you heard the term “fencing the table?” Fencing the table was, and is, a practice in the Church of Scotland, and other church traditions. Church elders, with the minister, would travel from home to home, often on a Saturday before a Sunday. They’d conduct a kind of examination to determine a church member’s readiness to partake in the Lord’s Supper the next day. If a member were deemed ready, they would receive something called a communion token. If not, they could still come to church, but no communion for you.

The fencing came into play as some churches created actual physical barriers – railings, roping, whatever – between the section of people who had tokens and those who didn’t. They literally, but more accurately spiritually, fenced the table, to protect – in their mind – the integrity of the sacrament, the purity of the congregation, and the wellbeing of the person themselves, arguing that nonparticipation was better than theologically misunderstood participation.

Now before you all start devising your church exit strategies from this place, let me assure you of no plans for such a plan here! Seriously! I do like the notion of home visits, and I really like the notion of preparing your heart and spirit for the Lord’s Supper, so that it not become a rote exercise. But the concept of having everything just right, your spiritual act pulled together, as a precondition of coming to the table, seems like a bad marketing strategy. More so, it is foreign to our experience and the life of faith.

It is BECAUSE we don’t have it all figured out, that we misstep in ways big and small, that we come to the table. It is because we need to experience more grace, rather than already possessing enough (thank you very much) that we show up at all, bringing our full humanity. Fencing the table presumes that we are worthy, somehow, when, in fact, we come as guests invited. There was a time when the perception was that one had to be perfect to come to church, wearing their Sunday best inside and out. We knew better then, if we were honest, and we certainly know better now. Now it’s not likely, I often read, for people in generations younger than mine to even want to enter a church, because of the reception they presume they will receive.

But it goes deeper than that. We know that things like Facebook and Instagram encourage us to post our best and shiniest selves, leaving out the parts we don’t want known. That perpetuates pretense, self-deception, worrying at deeper levels what others think, whether we’re 16 or 32 or 52 or 82, how many “likes” we can get as a measure of our worth. We subvert, or suppress, our full humanity, in a sense fencing our own table. And to the extent that religion has encouraged that, shame on us. It’s not good for the life of the community, and it’s not good for our souls.

And it's not who we are. We confess our sinfulness each Sunday, yes, but we do it the next Sunday as well because that's who we are. And it's who we've been. The biblical story, from creation through the gospels to the narrative of the early church is not rife with perfect followers, but rather all-too-human seekers who misstep, sometimes in small ways and other times quite dramatically. We've always come to the table bringing our flaws and shortcomings, our addictions and depression, our fears and estrangements. And our lamentations.

Lamentation is a tough word for us. We misunderstand it as complaining, or even whining. It is neither. Lamentation is not complaining about getting a parking ticket, or bemoaning a Phillies loss. Lamentation is about claiming our full selves, including those things that cause deep pain or hardship, done *by* us, done *to* us, and – in our context – sharing them with God. It may be good to share them with a friend or partner or counselor, but when we come to this place, we lament by sharing them with God. God welcomes it. God expects it. God can handle it, even when a lament is *about* God, the big questions of “why” and “how.”

Lament can lead to all kinds of things, positive things – repentance, recovery, reconciliation. For each of us and for all of us, as community.

We tend to shy away from the Book of Lamentations, but again the lectionary has invited us into a deep consideration of our individual and communal call to lament. The Book of Lamentations is a collection of poetic verses lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem. It is generally accepted that the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 586 BCE forms the background to the poems.

Imagine your city, your culture, your life, destroyed. It is almost unimaginable, and yet it happened, and happens. The unnamed writer of these words mourned, deeply, the desertion of the city by God, and its destruction. The words then called for the ultimate return of God. They function as a kind of funeral prayer in which the bereaved cries out and addresses the dead.

The tone is bleak: God is silent. The degree of suffering is understood as undeserved. Expectations of future redemption are minimal. Using feminine imagery, we hear: “How lonely sits the city...how like a widow she has become...she weeps bitterly in the night, with ‘tears on her cheeks’ – suffering, servitude, distress, desolation.” Something catastrophic has happened, and we hear honest, raw, real grief – spoken to the people, to the universe, to God.

Psalms 137 reflects on the destruction of Jerusalem from the perspective of captivity – the tears of destruction turning into the tears of exile. “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” So much grief and sadness. So many deep and real tears.

What is extraordinary to me about all of this is that not only does the Bible not seek to hide this lamentation, but puts it on full display, in all of its bleak, grim reality, like a family unafraid to deal with conflict. We are honest enough to state it. God is big enough to receive it.

And yet...we say it not as the final word, but as a word along the way. That's why fencing the table is problematic to me. That's why pretense and self-delusion, the kind of theological wishful thinking that is a mile wide and an inch deep, is not helpful.

That's why I love communion so much, and today, World Communion. We bring our full selves – our best and worst selves – to the table, an open table. And we bring the world's lament to the table as well – whether destruction and exile and captivity of 2600 years ago or the brokenness and fear of this very moment.

And as best we can, we who have privilege and access, we lament with those whose voices are not heard, lament with a full sense of humility and contrition for the ways we have contributed to their tears.

We come to the table not thinking that the root causes of lamentation will magically disappear – that is a kind of shallow optimism. We come in hope. Hope, a sense of trust that whether enduring cancer or abuse or loneliness, whether enduring famine or oppression, that God is present, that God hears our lamentation.

Paul writes to Timothy to give thanks and encouragement. "Recalling your tears," Paul says – there are those tears of lament again – I want to support your faith. Paul kindles Timothy's sense of love and power so that the faith entrusted to him might prevail.

That is what communion does. It's not magic, erasing our deep grief and hardship, or making the very profound and complex brokenness of the world disappear, like a divine delete key. Rather, it is a first step, fortifying us for the journey, placing our lamentation and all of human suffering in a deeper context.

We will come to the table in just a few moments. No fences, no tokens needed, simply an open heart and spirit and a willingness to bring your whole self, just as you are, and to bring the deep brokenness of the world with you. As you are mindful here of those who come to the table with you, envision others – around the world and through time. Imagine their hurts and pains, their tears. Imagine. You will be met not only with a little morsel of bread and a sip of juice. You will be met with hope, a good treasure entrusted to you, entrusted to us, by a God who wipes away our tears and calls us to heal the world. Amen.