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*"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"*

## **GIVING VOICE TO PAIN: TEACHING CHURCHES TO GRIEVE**

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## Giving Voice to Pain: Teaching Churches to Grieve

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- I. The Exclusion of Lament from Christian Worship
  - A. Gardner (2007) recounts a worship service following the events of September 11, 2001 in which a significant number of attendees expressed their distress at how the worship had “failed them” because the well-intentional worship planners constructed a service that invited the congregation to “dance, laugh, sing and create.” Many in the congregation needed to lament.
  - B. Rare is the Sunday in which among those who come together, there are not individuals or families gripped by pain and who bear wounds that often have to be borne in secrecy: family estrangement, economic stress, joblessness, grief, guilt, depression, human oppression, injustice, illness or impending death. Wolterstorff (1986) observes that we “leave our home, our offices, and our playgrounds and assemble for the liturgy. But we do not leave behind our *experience* in our lives of dispersion. We carry that experience with us.”
  - C. There has been a tendency to ignore private pain and systemic suffering. Ramshaw (1987) observes, “The deep cry of lament was drowned out by cheerful ditties.” She adds that even the Eucharist in such congregations is a “kind of happy hour.” (p. 320).
  - D. The exclusion of lament screens out people who have experienced a deep and profound loss. The reality for such people is grief, anger, protest, despair, emptiness, loss of meaning, and abandonment. Wolterstorff (1986) insists that a

“fundamental dimension of the liturgy is that in it we give expression . . . precisely to our experience in the world and our response to that experience.”

- E. The real pain of their grief is the pain of isolation. Simundson (2001) observes, “To lament at all is painful. To lament alone is agony.”
- F. A clear consequence of banishing the many moods of lament is that a church disenfranchises those sufferers who need to hear some word that recognizes their pain and an honest language that allows them to vocalize their sense of loss and uncertainty.
- G. A serious failure of ministry is to ignore lament as an essential resource in confronting those emotions that terrify us – in a context where one might expect some help and understanding.
- H. McCutchen (1995) asks what would happen to our practice of worship if it became the place where we were not afraid to draw together the tragic, the negative, the hurtful, as we try to fill these experiences with meaning.
- I. Wolterstorff (2001) reminds us that “Lament does not market well” and asserts “We do not like tears in church” (p. 396). Saliers (1994) says that Christian public worship finds praise and thanksgiving far less demanding when lament is suppressed.

## II. The Decline of Lament in Christian Worship

- A. Gardner (2007) observes that throughout its history, the church has regarded lament “with a mixture of suspicion and hostility.” He notes the push toward worship as a joyous celebration of Jesus’ triumph over sin and death.
- B. Hughes (2004) chronicles the decline of lament in church history and describes several factors that

converged in Christianity's liturgical development that silenced the voice of lament.

1. The influence of classical Greek culture.
  - a. Greek tragedy depicted lament unfavorably.
  - b. Plato viewed lament as non-rational feminine behavior and expressed a definitive affirmation of masculine control, self-respect and rationality as normative.
  - c. Athens passed laws to "privatize" grief and to "control excessive female mourning" which might destabilize the state.
2. Plato's rejections of lamentation survived in the critique of Greek lament by Fathers of the Christian Church.
  - a. In the early centuries of the common era, the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity evolved funeral rites that emphasized death as a blessing, a natural passage in God's providential plan. Because of Christ's resurrection, the meaning of death has shifted. "The dirge gave way to something thought to be more appropriately joyous" (Gardner, 2007, p. 24).
  - b. Christianity absorbed the fear of lament as "feminine" and further regarded the voiced grief of women as sexually provocative (Chrysostom, St. Ambrose).
3. Christian theologians sought to replace lament with patience before the majesty of God.
  - a. Aquinas's reflections on Job urged submission to hierarchical order of divine providence.

- b. Luther subordinated lament to penitential experiences grounded in Psalm 51.
  - c. Calvin said that God is the ultimate agent of our suffering and grief. He allows us to suffer for our own good. The appropriate response is therefore one of patience, even gratitude (Wolterstorff, 2001). Hughes (2001) suggested that Calvin regarded lament as a manifestation of the sin of blasphemy in the forms of murmuring and disputing God.
  - d. The history of Protestant worship contains a strong stand of suppressing the difficult psalms, especially the imprecatory psalms of vengeance. Saliers (1994) said that Wesley declared Psalm 137 as unfit for Christian tongues. Froehlich (2001) documents the function of praise and lament in the tradition of the Christian Psalter. He describes how Psalms came to be appropriated as a "Christian book" from the first century to the middle ages as the church "christologized" the book so that Christ's voice was heard.
4. McCutchan (1995) attributes blame for the lack of lament in Christian worship to the pulpit and the pew.
- a. The pulpit avoids sermons on lament or if lament material is utilized it is "baptized" with praise so that its remorse is covered. Or the despair is attributed to the psalmist and no attempt is made to recognize ourselves. The congregation remains bystanders, not participants.

- b. The pew finds lament outside its comfort zone. We can handle emotion if it is praise, but not if it is anger or a questioning spirit.
- C. Hughes (2004) reports an historical shift from lament to providence and says this neglect of lament has prevented a realistic confrontation with suffering and death. He adds that today's liturgies are ill-suited for discharging the anger and deep sorrow that grieving people experience.
- D. Hughes (2004) argues that this decline has resulted in a negative impact on faith, resulting in a submissive attitude toward death and an uncritical tendency to identify divine providence with all forms of suffering, including disproportionate and catastrophic forms (tsunami; Hurricane Katrina; 9/11).

### III. The Value of Restoring Lament into Christian Worship

- A. The Bible is filled with lament.
  - 1. Hebrew sages and singers produced poetry to reflect their spiritual states and experiences (Psalms of lament; Jeremiah's personal laments; Job; Book of Lamentations; Habakkuk's complaints; David's laments).
    - a. Brueggemann (2001b) insists that lament and complaint "constitute Israel's primary alternative liturgic, pastoral, and theological option" in times of crisis. Lament was not an act of "unfaith" but an act of "daring, serious faith."
    - b. The Psalms were sung in public worship.
  - 2. Jesus weeps over Jerusalem and laments on the cross.
- B. Lament gives voice to pain.

1. Westermann (1979) says that “The theological significance of the personal lament lies first of all in the fact that it gives voice to suffering. The lament is the language of suffering; in it suffering is given the dignity of language . . .” (p. 42).
  2. Scarry (1985) said that pain is language shattering and there is a need to find language to express that pain.
  3. Lament is an authentic form of spirituality. To lament is to be completely honest before God. A lament is a search that uses the language of pain, anger, and confusion as it moves toward God (Hughes, 2004; Allender, 1995). It is an active approach to pain, an act of faith.
  4. Suffering is something to be brought before God. Wolterstorff (1988) says the true function of lament is supplication; “it is the means by which suffering comes before the One who can take it away” (p. 394).
  5. Proctor-Smith (1993) insists that the inclusion of lament into Christian worship would grant an authenticity it sometimes lacks, especially for those who suffer and have “not been able to find a voice for their sorrow before God” (p. 9).
- C. Lament should be a part of Christian worship because pain deepens one’s sense of loneliness, it separates.
1. Lament is the cry of “Why?”, a cry that Hughes (2004) describes as “the lonely sound of faith amid the silent void.”
  2. Balentine (2001) says that thanksgiving and lament are “never private affairs.” He suggests that a worship service structured around an exposition of a lament Psalm can “constructively shape the worship experience

by inviting the community to search their own stories for concrete reasons to rejoice.”

3. If to sing in sorrow legitimizes the pain and struggle, then how much better to do so in the company of a loving community.
  4. Allender (1995) says singing in sorrow is to befriend one another and to “authenticate that we are not alone, even if one does not fully comprehend our pain.” He adds, “The awareness that we are not alone increases our courage to honestly look at the pain and to struggle to know God” (p. 35). He adds that to sing a lament together enables one to more readily ask “How are you?”
    - a. Brueggemann (2001) suggests that “Those who resist complaint as a valid alternative to praise are likely those who have not yet had to go deeply enough into distress and suffering where one is compelled to do what otherwise is unthinkable and inappropriate” (p. 38).
  5. To sing sorrow in the congregation also opens the door to accountability (Allender, 1995). Pain can numb the heart causing one to vow they will not hurt again, an oath that leaves the heart calloused and blind to the heartache of others. It gives one less excuse to withdraw from the fellowship assuming that they do not understand, an assumption that destroys the “integrity of the true Christian community” (p.35)
- D. Hughes (2004) suggests that the Biblical lament provides a structure and form to help victims to create narratives to address anger, despair, complaint, and to affirm trust in God in spite of acute suffering.
1. Lament imparts a drive toward meaning-making in the form of “restorative retelling”, the

narrative reframing of a violent death, senseless loss, or traumatic event in order to integrate the teller of the story as an active participant, rather than a horrified witness, and to reconnect the teller with the living memories of the deceased (Hughes, 2004).

2. Restorative retelling helps one construct meaning out of something experienced as irrational and meaningless. A victim/survivor might talk out memories and feelings within a support group or community (*congregation!*)
3. The Book of Lamentations is a restorative retelling of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. The poetry retells the pain and suffering using individual and community lament “within the rhythm of a public liturgy” (Hughes, 2004).
4. The Gospels are restorative retellings of the crucifixion of Jesus drawing upon lament Psalms 22, 31, and 69 (Hughes, 2004).

#### IV. The Use of Lament in Christian Worship: Examples

- A. Cultures that are formed or defined by suffering are not reluctant to enter worship with pain and to cry in lament. It is not viewed as a violation of faith.
  1. Such cultures (Black South Africa, Holocaust survivors, African-Americans) produce music, poetry, and literature that is haunting and compelling (Allender, 1995).
  2. The African-American church is the heir to the “sorrow songs” (Bailey, 2003; Allender, 1995).
  3. In such cultures, lament embodies the “passions of need, the fight against

injustice” but also proclaims hope (Allender, 1995).

4. W. E. B. DuBois insisted that the sorrow songs breathed hope and faith in the “ultimate justice of things” (Allender, 1995).
- B. McCutchan (1993) illustrates how Psalm 13 might be used as a prayer of intercession for marriage breakup, long illness, business failure, and homelessness; Psalm 31 for victims of AIDS or another illness. He also describes the use of Psalms 42 and 43 to address grieving parents; Psalm 39 to address depression and suicide; and Psalm 88 for sexual abuse.
- C. Vanderwell and Malefyt (1997) detail a service planned after a tragic accident resulted in the death of a church member and the serious injury of another. The service is based on Psalm 13 and uses antiphonal readings, specially selected music and prayers of intercession.
- D. McLaren (2007), Apol (2003), Weed (2008), and Siwo-Okundi (2008) give examples of sermons that address the language of lament, Psalm 6, and violence against women.
- E. Achtemeier (2001) discusses sermon preparation from Psalms of lament.
- F. Froelich (2001) is not convinced that congregations should be “treated to artificial lament services” in order to compensate for the neglect of lament in the church’s liturgy. He does argue that there are natural occasions for letting grief and distress be expressed in genuine lament during the “life cycle of the Christian year” – Lent, Passion and Easter.
- G. Balentine (2001) considers the season of Lent as an appropriate time for pondering the interval between pain and petition, what he calls the “transition from lament to praise.”

- H. Saliers (1994) says that lament must enter into Christian liturgy because, in a sense, it is already there in Good Friday as well as Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross. Saliers continues, "It is there when we pray honestly for the imprisoned, those who suffer innocently . . . Lament is implied by the broken bread and poured out wine of the Eucharist" (pp. 123-124).

## V. Conclusion

- A. Power (1990) insists that "If there is no place in worship for lament, there is no way in which churches can wrestle with God over human suffering, and hence no accepted reaction to suffering other than to endure it with resignation" (p. 157).
- B. Ramshaw (1987) cautions that "We must lament without reveling in lament: we revel in grace" (p. 321). She reminds us that "even our deepest experience of abandonment by God leads to our praise in the assembly . . ."
- C. Wolterstorff (1986) acknowledges that the liturgy is for crying the tears of lament and suffering, but it is also for "blowing the trumpets of joy over our experience of the world as gift and glorious work of God" (p. 22). He adds, "In Holy Communion, mysteriously, we do them together" (p. 22).
- D. Allender (1995) agrees that lament is not an end in itself. It is not the "staple of our worship" or the song of choice, but it opens the heart to wrestle with God who knows that sorrow leads to comfort and lament to praise "as sure as the crucifixion gave way to resurrection" (p. 36).
- E. Allender (1995) observes that one must learn to lament in worship and prayer if passion for God is to grow. When one merely sees lament as a "quick slide into doubt and despair" one fails to see that

doubt and despair are the “dark soil necessary to grow confidence and joy.”

- F. While Christians seldom “sing in the minor key”, the church must learn to sing songs that face life with both honesty and hope if we are to persist in inviting into our assemblies those who know life is not easy (Allender, 1995).

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## Appendix Outlines of Lament Services

Weed, K. (2008) The Psalmist's Lament *Journal of Religion & Abuse*, 8, 15-22.

The sermon was preached on Domestic Violence Awareness Sunday in a Presbyterian congregation. The church had a month long collection to benefit a local shelter for battered women.

Text: Psalm 55:1-8, 12-14, 16-17, 20-22; Eph. 5:21

### I. Introduction

- A. Strong Hebrew tradition of believers going to God in times of trouble
- B. Psalmist is in deep despair
- C. Betrayed by an intimate
- D. Suffered from a broken promise

### II. Betrayal of a Relationship

- A. These are the emotions of women abused by their husbands
- B. Power, control, and silence
- C. Betrayal continues for these women every time their pain is denied.
  - 1. Stay in marriage out of Christian duty
  - 2. Belief that sanctity of marriage is more important to God than the life of the woman or her children
  - 3. Women remain silent in their congregations about the abuse that they suffer.

### III. Churches Support Silence

- A. Naivete
- B. Mind Your Own Business Syndrome
- C. We Don't Know What to Do
- D. We Blame the Victim
- E. Theological Beliefs

### IV. A Closer Look at Ephesians 5

- A. Subject to one another
  - B. Paul raises the standard by comparing the husband's leadership of family to that of Jesus and the Church.
  - C. Passage cannot be used to justify abuse
- V. Church's Role in Addressing Domestic Violence
- A. Break the silence
  - B. Build bridges between congregation and domestic violence agencies
  - C. Participate in Resolve Awareness Walk and Candlelight Vigil
  - D. Financial support for domestic violence agencies
  - E. Learn about domestic violence
  - F. Become proactive
  - G. Being pastoral
  - H. Showing the world a better way
- VI Conclusion
- A. Return to text (Ps 55:22 - "cast your burden on the Lord")
  - B. Lament spoken in context of faith
  - C. Faith sustains, providing strength, courage, comfort, and hope.

Siwo-Okundi, E. (2008) Violence against women and girls: Where is God in "This"? *Journal of Religion & Abuse*, 8, 7-14.

Text: 2 Samuel 13: 1-22

I. Introduction

- A. Violence against women, girls comes in many forms
- B. Incidence of domestic violence
- C. Bible has numerous accounts of women/girls who are violated

II. Listen to Women and Girls

- A. Tamar is heard by not listened to
- B. The church hears about domestic violence, but does it listen to pleas of victims?

III. Recognize the Full Humanity of Women and Girls

- A. Reducing women, girls to mere objects
- B. Tamar experiences the "theft of her humanity" when Amnon violates her ("Put this woman out of my presence")
- C. Tamar becomes nameless object ("this")

IV. Cry Aloud with Women and Girls

- A. Tamar went away crying and cries alone
- B. Church must be willing to cry WITH women and girls who are abused and violated.

V. Where is God in "This"?

- A. Church must be moved by the cries of those abused
- B. Church must be first ones to hear the cries of the oppressed
- C. Through Tamar, the church is challenged to listen to the voices of those who are violated
- D. Her story challenges popular ideas about violence against women and girls
- E. Church must ask "Where is God in this?"