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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

DARKNESS IS MY CLOSEST FRIEND: USING THE PSALMS OF LAMENT TO ADDRESS GRIEF ISSUES

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I. Processing the Experience of Grief

- A. Because we love and get attached, grief is an inevitable part of living. It is our response to the losses we experience throughout life. Though we share common grief reactions, each person's experience of loss and grief is unique.**
- B. Situations of profound loss tax us physically, cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually. We grieve with all of our might, mind, heart, and soul.**
- C. Models of grief counseling share a common denominator: one must accept the reality of the loss and experience the pain of the loss.**
- D. People have found a variety of ways to acknowledge the reality and pain of loss and begin the process of making meaning out of the experience.**
 - 1. J. K. Rowling's mother died while she was writing her first Harry Potter book. The event led her to make her hero suffer the death of his parents.**
 - 2. *Black Cadillac* represents Rosanne Cash's grappling with hurt and her search for answers subsequent to the deaths of her stepmother, father, and mother within a year and a half.**

3. Lee Smith wrote her novel *On Agate Hill* (Algonquin Books) as a prescription following her 33 year-year-old son's death of acute myocardiopathy.
4. Cindy Bullens' *Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth* (Artemis Records) chronicles her journey through grief in song following the death of her daughter to cancer.
5. C. S. Lewis penned his grief over his wife's death in a journal that was published as *A Grief Observed*.

E. These artists stand in a long line of lamenters. Their struggle for meaning in the face of grief (What does all this mean? Why God? Why this? Why me?) can be witnessed in the poetry produced by Hebrew sages and singers to reflect their spiritual states and experiences (Lamentations, Job, David's laments over Jonathan and Absalom, Jeremiah's poems of lament, Habakkuk's complaints, and the Psalms of lament).

II. The Nature of the Psalms of Lament

A. Brueggemann (1984) suggests that the Psalms might be divided into three groups:

1. Orientation (written in context of well-being that evoke gratitude for blessings and express confidence and joy: 8, 19, 33, 104, and 145 (creation); 1, 15, 19, 24, 119 (law); 14, 49, 112 (wisdom); 11, 16, 23, 46, 131, and 133 (God's enduring presence).
2. Disorientation (written during times of hurt, alienation, suffering, and loss which evoke questions, doubts, rage, and despair. People are confused, bewildered, angry, and cry out): 3, 5, 6,7, 10, 13, 14,16, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27:7-14, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42-43, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69, 71, 77, 86, 88, 90, 94, 102,109, 120, 123, 126, 129, 130, 140, 141, 142, and 143.
3. New Orientation (written after being overwhelmed with a sense of hope. God has responded to the lament and the petitioner has been transformed by the divine response which evokes praise: 30, 40, 138, 34, 65, 66, 124, 114, 29, 93, 96, and 97.

B. Psalms of lament arise from times of trouble and express the fullness of human suffering. Brueggemann (1986) argues that the lament Psalms are a complaint that insists:

1. Things are not right in the present arrangement;

2. They need not stay this way but can be changed;
3. The speaker will not accept them in this way, for it is intolerable;
4. It is God's obligation to change things.

The main point is that life isn't right; it is not what it was promised to be.

C. They address death-related and non-death related losses.

1. Unjust physical suffering and illness
2. Alienation and exile
3. Humiliation
4. Injustice
5. Death

D. Structure of a lament

1. Complaint (cry for help and description of distress)
2. Petition (an appeal to God and reasons for divine intervention)
3. Praise (ends on note of certainty that the prayer has been heard and a vow to praise God for deliverance)

E. Examples of lament Psalms

1. Psalm 13
2. Psalm 88
3. Select readings from the lament Psalms

F. The lament Psalms reflect the various dimensions of grief.

1. Physical (22:14-15, 17; 38:3, 7, 8, 10, 17; 55:17; 69:3; 77:4-10; 88:4; 137:1)
2. Social (22:6, 11; 38:9, 11; 41:9; 66:10; 77:4-10; 88:8, 18)
3. Emotional (13:2; 22:1-2, 6; 38:4, 8, 9; 42:3, 5; 55:4, 5; 56:8; 69:1-2, 20, 29; 73:21; 77:2, 4; 80:4-5; 88:4; 137:9; 143:4)
4. Cognitive/spiritual (13:2; 22:1; 42:11; 43:5; 55:2; 60:1, 3; 69:21-22; 77:3, 7-9; 88:5, 14)
5. Behavioral (39:12; 55:7-8; 77:4; 88:13; 126:5-6)

III. The Value of the Psalms of lament in Understanding and Addressing Grief

- A. The Psalms of lament provide a language for pain so that the reality of the loss and the pain from that loss can be addressed.**

1. Scarry (1985) said that it is difficult to give language to pain, that pain is language shattering, that the certainty of a person in pain about the reality of that pain is matched only by the doubt of other persons about its reality. She speaks of the need to find language to express that pain.
2. Elie Wiesel suggests that abuse, torture, and terror drive speech to silence. It is far easier to suppress the memory of such events or gag them in silence than to bring them to memory and speech with all the pain this entails (Billman & Migliore, 1999).
3. “The deeper the sorrow the less tongue it has.” – The Talmud
4. Giving voice and language to the experience of suffering is precisely what happens in the form and words of the lament (Brown & Miller, 2005)
4. Jenkins (1998) insists that sufferers need an honest language that allows them to vocalize their sense of loss and uncertainty, their fears of what the future will hold, and their worries about how to deal with the changes in their lives.
5. Cook (2004) calls this “ungagging the voice of the victim.”
6. The prayer of lament is noticeably absent in the worship of Christian congregations. Meyer (1993) found that psalms of lament are poorly represented in the worship books of most mainline denominations. Thus they fail to make room for the experiences of anger, confusion, protest, and grief.
7. Schirmer (2001) found the lament psalms to have a cathartic value as he struggled with his own grief. He observed, “At some of the worst times I have paradoxically found comfort in Psalm 44:19 (But you have crushed me and made me a haunt for jackals and covered me over with deep darkness). These words, and the words of many of the lament psalms, have been cathartic in that they have encouraged me to utter my cry and have provided the words to express it.”
8. “Pain – is missed – in praise.” Emily Dickinson
9. “He who sings songs to a *heavy heart* is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on a wound.” (Proverbs 25:20)

10. **“We can praise God only when we are willing to trust him with our lamentations.” – M. Jenkins**
- B. The Psalms of lament validate and normalize the sadness, hurt, alienation, questions, doubts, anger, confusion, and bewilderment that accompany the grief process.**
1. **Because specific circumstances are not identified, the psalms may be applied in numerous situations.**
 2. **Cook (2004) observes, “We can no longer believe the victim to be subhuman after hearing this personal, human cry of lament. Therefore we come to empathize . . .”**
- C. The lament Psalms reduce the sense of isolation that grievors might feel as they realize they are in concert with a long line of sufferers.**
1. **In isolation, the power of pain grows more ominous and hurtful.**
 2. **In early Israel, lamentation was often a community event. Family and friends of the grief-laden individual were expected to show support by participating in the rituals of lamentation with the mourner (e. g. Job 2:12-13). To fail to show solidarity in such a situation, or even worse to rejoice while a neighbor was grieving, was to declare oneself an enemy rather than a covenantal partner (Lam. 1:2, 21). (Flesher, 2004).**
 3. **Mackey (2004) adds that lament was ritualistic in Hebraic experience. Entire companies of the faithful would join the expressions of mourning when it appeared God had not come through in a particular circumstance.**
 4. **Jeremiah’s lamentations over Judah were shared widely as a people wrestled with the apparent absence of God. So ritualistic were these lamentations that Zechariah gives directions that they must be in good order (12:11-14).**
 5. **Flesher (2004) observes that Israelite priests were always prepared to assist the community when one brought adversities. She says that today’s church, conforming to the larger death-denying culture, seems to be a place where grief and mourning are somewhat hushed. She adds, “We are a culture which encourages individual therapy as a substitute for communal ritualistic expressions of grief.”**
 6. **Reading and understanding the psalms of lament can inform**

individuals that they are not the first to feel abandoned by God. Widows facing an evening alone, desperate man wondering if he will find employment, teen in despair may be surprised to find that the psalmist knows of such situations of dire pain so that one feels cut off from God as well as from friends.

7. *Sophie's Choice*

D. The Psalms of lament invite one to listen to the anguish of another without judgment or censure.

- 1. Reading and contemplating the lament psalms can attune our ears to hear the anger and despair and the loneliness and terror of others.**
- 2. While one has no “solution” to the problem of evil and suffering, a large part of the care given to those who suffer consists in listening to the story of the one who suffers.**
- 3. Wolterstorff (1987) describes the anguished questions of those who grieve and for the need for others to listen:**

“Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it’s not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.” (*Lament for a Son*, p. 34.)

E. The Psalms give a voice of hope in the midst of despair.

- 1. Brown & Miller (2005) assert that lament in the Bible is first of all a form of prayer. It arises “out of the reality of human existence; it assumes there is something beyond that reality that can transform human existence without destroying it.”**
- 2. Black (2005) says that “the spine of lament is hope.” He insists this is not the empty optimism that “things will get better”, but the deep and irrepressible conviction that deliverance is at hand.**
- 3. “Lamentation is a journey towards God, not a final destination” (Balentine, 2004)**

4. Margalit (2004) is reminded of the Jewish Kaddish, the “mourner’s prayer” which does not mention death, but is purely a praise of God. Yet, he says, in the Kaddish the praise is in the future tense. The mourner is not asked to praise God in this moment when the grief is so intense, but to affirm that God will bless the future.
5. McLeod (2004) says that lament was not merely an opportunity to have a good cry and to “let it all hang out”, rather lament was to be associated with prayer, fasting, and deep, inner soul-searching reflection. He concludes, “Lament when properly undertaken produces a more contemplative person.”
6. The lament has value even if the reader is not a believer (excerpt *Heaven’s Prisoners*).

F. The Psalms provide structure for the process of grief itself.

1. Brueggemann (1977) compared the structure of psalms of lament with Kubler-Ross’s suggestion that the grief process tended to follow a regular form (five elements or stages). He found that the elements identified by Kubler-Ross may be correlated with the movement in Israel’s laments. The lament moves from petition to confidence to praise, while Kubler-Ross’s model moves from depression to acceptance.
2. Brueggemann’s purpose is not to criticize those engaged in charting the stages of grief and dying. His intention is to illustrate that it was the *form* of the lament that made possible the “transforming intervention.”
3. The central movement of the lament is a “sharp, discontinued step from plea to praise, from brokenness to wholeness.” The form serves the function of rehabilitation. They are structured to move one from sorrow to joy.
4. The basic *intention* of the lament in the psalms and other biblical writings are to rehabilitate those who are suffering, and the form of the lament helps to realize this objective (Capps, 2005; Capps, 1981). It does this when it “enhances experience and brings it to articulation” (Brueggemann, 1977).
5. What makes the lament effective in addressing situations of hurt, grief, misery, and despair is the fact that it provides a form for understanding and experiencing these hurts and agonies (Capps, 2005).

- 6. Capps (2005) says that one reason the personal lament form has survived for so long is that the original form was not specific about the conditions that gave rise to the lament, “enabling it to adapt itself to new circumstances that were unanticipated by the early psalmists.”**
- 7. The lament psalms serve as a model for persons who are living analogous situations, teaching them how to deal with their suffering.**
- 8. The range of emotions in the laments permits the sufferer to enter the process at any stage. In the words which ancients have already uttered the sufferer may recognize his/her own experience.**
- 9. Anne Weems, author of poetry, stories, and meditations, lost her 21-year old son in tragic circumstances. Brueggemann directed her attention to the lament psalms and suggested she compose her own psalms of lament. The eventual outcome was her book *Psalms of Lament*. Her prayers are honest, poignant cries of pain and faith.**
- 10. Select readings from *Psalms of Lament*.**

IV. Conclusion

- A. One need not shelve the biblical laments until he/she faces a desperate situation. Utley (1996) says reading them under more peaceful situations may “equip us tomorrow in ways that we can only imagine.”**
- B. Duff (2005) identifies three primary values of the psalms of lament. Psalms of lament:**
 - 1. Challenge our inability to acknowledge the intense emotions that grief entails;**
 - 2. Free us to make a bold expression of grief before God and in the presence of others;**
 - 3. Allow us to rely on God and the community to carry forth hope on our behalf when we ourselves have no hope in us.**
- C. The laments are appropriate for persons who cry out in all kinds of situations and for the endless events that cause us to grieve (loss of a job, end of a romantic relationship, death of a loved one, an act of injustice or violence).**

