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July 9, 2017

Jeremiah 15:10-21

Luke 19:41-44

## WE ARE WELL – LAMENTING BROKENNESS

Through my sermons over the last couple of weeks, we have been journeying with the prophet Jeremiah, looking at what he indicates is required to move toward wholeness for ourselves and for the larger human community. With his ministry six centuries before that of Christ's, we began our focus with Jeremiah's emphasis on just and right relationships, giving guidance and urgency to the Christian commitment to social justice. Then last week, we focused on the need to confront public and personal lies that tell us everything is alright, when they are not.

Today we focus on a different kind of truth and honesty – the kind that has to do with the real feelings you and I have about our and our world's situation. Among the prophets, Jeremiah is often considered a melancholy voice in the Hebrew scriptures. There is great sadness expressed in many of his writings, but he lived and ministered in heartbreaking times in the history of the Jewish people, so I actually consider his expressions of frustration and anger to be healthy ways of dealing with gloomy realities.

As someone who was raised in the South, I grew up knowing that when I was asked how I was doing, the correct answer, whether it was true or not was, "Fine." Now obviously, not all Southerners are doing 'fine' all the time. And frankly, I don't think it is only those of us who were shaped by Southern culture who are sometimes emotionally dishonest with ourselves and others. Unfortunately, church life and our spiritual life in relationship to God for some people become the last two arenas through which some would let anyone know that they are less than 'fine.' There are Christians who put on an almost plastic

smile and say something akin to, “God is in heaven and all’s right with the world.” But when all’s not right with the world, what is an honest way to relate to God and to one’s self?

Former Yale Divinity School professor William Muehl tells how one December afternoon, many years ago, he was among a group of parents who stood in the lobby of a nursery school waiting to claim their children after the last pre-Christmas class session. As the children rushed toward their parents, each one carried the “surprise,” the brightly wrapped package on which he or she had been working diligently for weeks. One small boy, trying to hurry, put on his coat, and wave, all at the same time, slipped and fell. The “surprise” flew out of his grasp, landed on the tile floor, and broke with an obvious ceramic crash.

The child’s first reaction was one of stunned silence. But then, he began what sounded like an inconsolable wail. His father, trying to comfort him, knelt down and murmured, “Now it doesn’t matter, son. It really doesn’t matter.” But his mother took a different approach, as she knelt down on the floor and swept the boy into her arms and said, “Oh, but it does matter. It matters a great deal.” And she wept along with her son. <sup>1</sup>

In our scripture text from Jeremiah today, we hear him going back and forth in conversation with God. The prophet has a gallon of frustration and only a cup to hold it. The people to whom he had been sent to minister had rejected him and the message God told him to deliver. He saw the coming destruction of Jerusalem and mourned over it. In describing this situation, Jeremiah doesn’t say, “It’s alright; it doesn’t matter,” because it mattered a great deal. Rather, he gives God an earful. In fact, Jeremiah honestly expresses his feeling that God is part of the problem. “Hey, God, you’re the One who is always supposed to be present, but I feel like you’ve left me all alone here with too big a job and no support. You’re the One who is supposed to be like living waters, but I feel like I’ve been left high and dry, or actually low and dry.”

Some of us may feel uncomfortable with this kind of brutally honest talk to God, but scripture gives quite a few examples of just that kind of angry expression or sad lament, from Moses in the wilderness, to Job in his distress, to many of the psalmists, to Jesus himself. Our Lord is described as weeping two different times in gospel accounts. Once was when his friend, Lazarus, had died, and Jesus mourned along with the family. The other time was described in our reading today from Luke. Right after coming into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus looks with love and concern at the city, understanding that it does not recognize the things that make for peace. He, like Jeremiah before him, mourns for the city that suffered spiritual brokenness at that time and would soon be physically destroyed by military forces. The name, Jerusalem, means ‘vision of peace’ and it was not living up to its identity.

When compassion encounters brokenness, lamentation is natural and healthy. In situations where the lament is directed toward God, that comes in contrast with other experiences of God’s goodness and blessings. When some of those blessings are perceived as being absent, it matters – it is a real loss. Honest expressions of disappointment and anguish during the difficult times help people of faith continue to care. In a world with so much pain, if we don’t hurt for it, we have no feeling. Numbness is a long way from wholeness. Expressing our sadness, our frustration, our anger, allows us to move beyond lament in a journey toward hope.

This is true for personal loss or as a response to societal concerns. Ruth Rylander was a nurse, a Presbyterian, a mother taking care of a very sick teenaged daughter. Her fifteen-year-old, Lynn, was diagnosed with a serious malignancy. Ruth knew the bad prognosis, but hoped against hope that her fears would prove unjustified. Watching her beautiful daughter undergo treatments that almost killed her was the most difficult and frightening experience of Ruth’s life. Lynn lost her hair, then her energy, then her will to live, and her mother could only sit by and watch as her daughter felt the intense pain of her illness. It was then that Ruth cried out to her pastor, “I wish I

wasn't a Christian because then I wouldn't feel so guilty about being this angry with God." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Ruth was stunned by her own admission and especially that she could have said such a thing in front of a minister. She was equally surprised by her pastor's gentle response. "God can handle your anger. If you didn't have God, what would you do with it?"

That answer was a turning point in Ruth's faith journey, who later expressed it this way: "I let myself be angry with God. I screamed at God out loud whenever I was alone in the house. When I wasn't alone, I screamed internally. I screamed in the car. I yelled at God. I pounded on God. Then it dawned on me in the midst of that experience that if we believe God is a heavenly parent, then that facet of God is different from the all-powerful, omnipotent God that I had always thought of. The God that was human enough to come to earth and suffer and die for us knows exactly what it is to be a parent who is suffering and angry. God must have understood my anger very well. God was doing for me at that time exactly what I, if I were a wise parent would do when my children came home after a bad day, angry at the world and yelling and pounding on me. The wise parent holds on to that kid, hugs that kid. I began to think of God in a personal way as ministering to me." <sup>2</sup>

When we relate openly and honestly to God in our prayers, in worship, we will find a new depth to the relationship. When we express our hurts for others, we will find greater capacity for compassion. When we cry out to God in our own pain and dismay, about the brokenness we have experienced, God cannot only handle it, but even gathers us into the divine arms and mourns with us. Out of that joint lamenting, our souls may find renewal. Our tears may become seeds for change as we work in partnership with our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer to bring greater healing and wholeness to a world in need.

"Jeremiah, Jesus, tell us the truth, does it really work that way?" I think their answer would be, "Honest to God."

<sup>1</sup> William Muehl, *All the Damned Angels*, Pilgrim Press Book, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from a resource written by Edward F. Campbell and Vera K. White, "When Are We Well? Peacemaking in Jeremiah," published by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, 1992.