

*Toward a Deeper Union:
The Place of Lamentation and Forgiveness in our Quest for Unity*

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

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Texts: Lamentations 1.1-6;
 Psalm 137;
 2 Timothy 1.1-14;
 Luke 17.1-10

There's been an invitation to come and feast with Christ. I'm glad you're here. You didn't have to be. You could be sleeping. You could be catching up on work. You could be enjoying a second cup of coffee and reading the paper. I'm glad you didn't do those things so that you can be here for World Communion Sunday. The spirit of this day has often felt to me like the spirit of a party! Christ himself is the host and the guest list is long. Believers from various traditions, from every corner of the globe are gathered around the table today ready to receive the gifts of God that draw us into communion with Christ.

The texts for this day, however, feel rather out of sync with that spirit of celebration. They are dark texts – at least the Old Testament lessons for today. These songs shall we say are not from the “party playlist” of the scriptures. They are lamentations – full of pathos, suffering, anger, bitterness. They *feel* quite frankly out of place on a day like today. Unless, of course, we want to forge a deeper union that goes beyond mere ceremony; that takes us deeper than a brief, fleeting moment where we figuratively hold hands and we sing kumbya and then go on our way unchanged.

If you look around this world wide table in your mind you would hear that we speak a hundred different languages. You would see that we worship in a thousand different ways. It wouldn't take long to notice that we don't all see eye to eye. Some of the guests at this table are enemies from nations who are at war with each other. You will see Syrian brothers and sisters whose places of worship are in crumbles from the fighting there. You will see Kenyans still shaken by the terror that gripped their country last week. And if you listen you will hear the harsh but quiet whispers of suspicion and judgment between parts of the body of Christ who do not respect or trust one another. And yet we stand side by side in the midst of our suffering and despite our division to come to receive the grace that draws us all into the realm of God.

If we do long for our unity to go deeper than mere symbol then perhaps these texts for today do strike the right themes for us. Lamentation is precisely the gift of God's realm

when we are suffering. I am grateful for the breadth of song and poetry in the worship of the Hebrew people. I appreciate the stark honesty and soulful expression of outrage and anger present within the psalms. What safer place is there to vent our murderous impulses when we have suffered violence and humiliation than here in the presence of God? I would so much rather have that kind of anger expressed in prayer than enacted in life!

The anger itself is not the problem. It's where we let our anger lead us that we need to watch. I ended up having a conversation about this very thing on Friday night with my daughter Cassidy. She gave me permission to share this with you today. We were leaving the Fun Run at school on Friday night. And I didn't give her enough transition time. She was flying high and wasn't ready to go and we got into it. There were some harsh words. As we were driving home, unsolicited she very quietly said to me "Mommy I am sorry I got so angry." Now apology isn't easy for a five year old so I took it straight to my heart as a gift but knew that I wanted to circle around to talk about it later. I wanted her to know and I needed to remember too that we don't have to be sorry about *feeling* angry. What we need to be careful about is what we do with our anger.

My suspicion is that the spiritual practice of lamentation - of giving voice in an unfiltered way to our anger and to our suffering - is the first step to ensure that we do not *act* on our vengeful impulses. When we bring our pain and our anger out of the shadows and into the light that is when God can begin the work of healing to fuel that passion toward something constructive - toward justice and reconciliation. Lamentation is a gift that pulls us toward God's realm.

In the same way, the forgiveness that Jesus teaches in the gospel today is exactly where we need to go when division is tearing us at the seams. And honestly you don't have to take a global view in order to appreciate how fragile the unity of Christ's church can be. You don't have to go outside this room - or your own family - to understand how fragile the unity of the Body of Christ can be. Just look at one of the sayings Jesus mentioned to his disciples in our passage from Luke today. There is a lot in this gospel passage today but let's just look at one of these sayings. One is probably enough. We've been reading through a series of parables and teachings of Christ these last weeks that are rather hard. Some are hard to understand like the parable of the dishonest manager from a couple of weeks ago. Others aren't so hard to understand they are just hard to live. This saying about forgiveness falls into the "hard to live" category.

Frankly, few of us like to deal with conflict. If someone offends us we'd just as soon never see them again than have to tell them how their words or actions have hurt us. I think often that is what people's blustering anger is about. I say blustering anger to distinguish it from the kind of anger addressed in the psalm for today. I'm talking about the kind of anger that is really a cover for something else underneath - some pain - some heartache. To actually go to someone who has caused that pain and to tell them the truth and invite

them back into relationship with you...many of us would just as soon never speak to them again.

But Jesus isn't done. Not only should you go to that person and seek to restore the relationship but if that same person sins against you seven times a day and turns back to you seven times and says "I repent", you must forgive. When the disciples hear it they beg Christ to give them more faith! Jesus' response is to say "if you had faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, you could do the impossible."

I've been thinking a lot about what Jesus meant by that response. I doubt that Jesus meant it as a way of shaming them: "You say you need more faith. I say if you had *any* faith at all you could do this." Jesus often takes elements of the natural world and uses them as metaphors for spiritual insight. Why does Jesus use the image seed as a metaphor for faith? There is incredible potential inside a seed. If you didn't have experience with how things grow and someone put this tiny little speck in your hand and said "did you know that inside that little seed is an entire tree?" you'd look at them and think they were crazy.

Maybe that's it. Maybe that is what faith is like: being able to envision something that is not yet here and believing that the first little step you take toward that vision has the kind of potential that is locked inside even the tiniest of seeds. Jesus' teaching ministry is about casting a vision. His goal is to re-orient the way we see: the way we see ourselves, the way we see each other, the way we see God. The life of faith is a constant re-framing of our assumptions and our beliefs and our expectations. The good news is it only takes the smallest correction in order to shift our perception. That is particularly true when it comes to forgiveness. Think of what this world or what your life would be like if we all lived the kind of forgiveness Jesus describes here. I get that it feels impossible. The bigger the offense, the deeper the hurt, the harder it seems. But the potential for healing and unity in Christ's Body is locked up inside that little seed that sits in each one of our hands.

Remember who is our host today. The hands he stretches out to welcome us to the table have scars on them; scars that come from a time in his life with us when he was willing to stake his life on the kind of forgiveness he is teaching us about today. And all he asks of us is that we take the smallest of steps forward trusting that as we do our perception of what is possible will change. That we will join with him in this life of forgiveness not to wrestle some kind of reward from God or to ward off some feared punishment but because we have come to see with clarity the power and the freedom that comes from a life lived with Christ.

Perhaps these were the perfect texts for us today after all. They lay the foundation to make this day a truly joyful celebration. So come for all things are now ready.