

“Lament, Be Forgiven and Forgive”

(The scripture readings are within the sermon)

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September 11, 2011

North Presbyterian Church

Lamentations was written after the destruction of Jerusalem. Many people were killed, tortured or taken captive. Jews read Lamentations on the anniversaries of the destruction of the temple.

Frank Ramirez writes, “A lamentation allows a question like ‘How could God allow this to happen?’ to be asked without expecting an answer. These words of anguish and suffering can provide an opening for all to share their grief and pain. Remember that a lamentation is different from a complaint. We expect that a complaint will end in results. A lamentation recognizes not only bitter pain but the fact that we are helpless to change that event. It happened and we suffer. But it also recognizes that God is present in our troubles.”

As a portion of Lamentation is read let it resonate with your own pain, suffering and tears. **Lamentation 1:1-4, 6-7, 11, 16 & 3:19-23 “Jerusalem, once so full of people, is now deserted. She who was once great among the nations now sits alone like a widow. Once the queen of all the earth, she is now a slave. She sobs through the night; tears stream down her cheeks. Among all her lovers, there is no one left to comfort her. All her friends have betrayed her and become her enemies. Judah has been led away into captivity, oppressed with cruel slavery. She lives among foreign nations and has no place of rest. Her enemies have chased her down, and she has nowhere to turn. The roads to Jerusalem are in mourning, for crowds no longer come to celebrate the festivals. The city gates are silent, her priests groan, her young women are crying—how bitter is her fate! All the majesty of beautiful Jerusalem has been stripped away. Her princes are like starving deer searching for pasture. They are too weak to run from the pursuing enemy. In the midst of her sadness and wandering, Jerusalem remembers her ancient splendor. But now she has fallen to her enemy, and there is no one to help her. Her enemy struck her down and laughed as she fell. Her people groan as they search for bread. They have sold their treasures for food to stay alive. “O Lord, look,” she mourns, “and see how I am despised. “For all these things I weep; tears flow down my cheeks. No one is here to comfort me; any who might encourage me are far away. My children have no future, for the enemy has conquered us.” The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss. Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the Lord never ends! God’s mercies never cease. Great is God’s faithfulness; God’s mercies begin afresh each morning.**

A few weeks ago we explored how Joseph forgave his brothers in Genesis chapter 45. Joseph was the favorite son causing great jealousy to fester in his brothers. Joseph’s brothers beat him, threw him in a dried up well and sold him into slavery. Joseph endured years and years of hard labor as a slave followed by years of hard labor in an Egyptian prison. Finally Joseph helps Pharaoh manage the food supply which enables Joseph to become the second most powerful person in all of Egypt. A severe famine hits. Joseph’s family desperate for food comes to Egypt where they are reunited with Joseph. Joseph forgives his brothers and tries to help them forgive themselves by inviting them to ponder how God brought good out of their sinful deeds. Joseph’s entire family moves to Egypt. Years later, upon the death of Jacob their father Joseph’s brothers once again become afraid that Joseph will seek justice for their misdeeds. We pick up the story in Genesis

chapter 50. **Genesis 50:14-21** “After Joseph had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father. Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as God is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way Joseph reassured them, speaking kindly to them.”

Today is the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Abraham's family, God's family, continues to fight. We have seen the evil people can do and we have seen great courage in the face of it. Unlike Joseph we, the United States, did not forgive our brothers and sisters, instead we retaliated seeking justice, so the fighting between us continues.

Gary Cecil writes, “It is precisely in these times when we confront evil or tragedy that we can be tempted to put ourselves in the place of God, passing our own judgment or assigning our own meaning—or lack of it—to it all. At least that's the warning I hear in today's scripture lesson when Joseph asked, “Am I in the place of God?”

Can we forgive? Can we refrain from playing God, from judging what others do to us? Imagine Joseph's temptation to retaliate, to seek justice against his brothers for the great evil they did to him. Most of us can easily imagine it for the United States continues to fight wars of revenge against our brothers and sisters. Most of us can imagine the urge to use power to punish those who have wronged us. Most of us can imagine it because as a culture we still support the idea of an eye for an eye. A belief that through our legal system there is a settlement or sentence to be judged and enforced for wrongs committed. We are standing in Joseph's shoes, holding great power to judge and punish or to forgive.

Perhaps Joseph was able to forgive because he knew he wasn't perfect. Joseph realized that he made mistakes and sinned. Joseph knew he needed to be forgiven. He realized that by flaunting his favorite status and bragging to his brothers he was throwing fuel on their jealousy. What about us, the United States, do we do things that tend to make others hate us? Do we flaunt our power, resources and wealth? Do we try to impose our views on others? In our constant pursuit for cheap oil have we used some people?

Clearly Joseph's brothers should have forgiven him right from the start. No amount of flaunting or bragging should have resulted in a beating and sale into slavery. No amount of our, the United States, actions should have result in the tragedy of 9/11. Sometimes the victim has done absolutely nothing to spark injustice, yet each and everyone of us has made mistakes and needs to be forgiven of something.

The world is one really big dysfunctional family. The Joseph story and 9/11 are different pages in our family album. Some will argue that offering forgiveness and mercy is OK as long as the sinners are repentant. I can find nowhere in scripture where Joseph's brothers ever even say they are sorry for what they did to Joseph let alone be repentant or offer some form of compensation for their misdeeds. In fact just the opposite they lie, making up a story, that it is their father's dying wish that they be forgiven. Joseph refuses to judge any of this and forgives them. Does God really want us to not judge and forgive everyone, even those who have wronged us but never say as much as sorry?

The gospel of Matthew states, **Matthew 18:21-35** “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, **“Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?”** **“No, not seven times,”** Jesus replied, **“but seventy times seven! “Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn’t pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt. “But the man fell down before his master and begged him, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.’ Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. “But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. “His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it,’ he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn’t wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. “When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ Then the angry king sent the man to prison until he had paid his entire debt. “That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.”**

Peter thought he was being overly generous, gracious and merciful in suggesting that one ought to forgive seven times. Jesus’ reply of “seventy times seven!” means infinite forgiveness. There is to be absolutely no limit on forgiveness of any kind. The parable illustrates extravagant forgiveness. The first servant owed 10,000 talents, which is a highly exorbitant amount exceeding the entire country’s revenues for ten years at that time. It is an amount so big it has not chance of ever being repaid. There is absolutely no debit, no crime, no wrong against us no matter how big or evil that we are ever justified in not forgiving it. The servant is not only forgiven, the entire debt is entirely forgiven, not even a reduce payment plan is sought. This illustrates God’s extravagant, limitless forgiveness of us that can never be earned. Yet this servant was unable to forgive a small debit that had a very good chance of being repaid. God freely forgives us. God asks is that we freely forgive each other.

Charles Henderson wrote, “As depicted by Jesus forgiveness is not just a fuzzy feeling; it expresses itself in specific behavior. The canceling of a debt, the pardoning of a crime, the swinging open of the prison doors. That’s why Jesus was in so much trouble with the priests, the lawyers, and law enforcement officers of his day. Jesus didn’t seem to be very concerned about their problems of law enforcement; Jesus didn’t seem to be sensitive to their difficulties in the practical administration of justice. In the world of practical politics we can’t let every debt be cancelled; we can’t allow every criminal to go unpunished. The simple administration of justice requires enforcement of the law. But that was not Christ’s principal concern. Where the world sees the human family divided between the good and the bad, between the righteous and the sinners, between my team and your team, Jesus sees one family. Jesus sees all of us equally in need of God’s mercy and equally called to the work of mercy. ... We cannot even begin to heal the wounds that afflict us all by force alone. Neither this nation’s most powerful weapons, nor the most efficient police force in the world can begin to heal the wounds of the heart. The heart is where the real work of healing must begin; and that is where forgiveness plays its part. ... We must let go of our anger and resentment or we shall die. When we clutch our judgments and our accusations close to our hearts, our hearts themselves are poisoned. For our own sakes we need to pray, pray, that we find the grace to forgive in our

neighbors what God has already forgiven in us. Thanks be to God for a mercy strong enough and bold enough to set us free.”

A. B. Simpson said, “Some Christians are easily turned away from the greatness of their life's calling by pursuing instead their own grievances and enemies. They ultimately turn their lives into one petty whirlwind of warfare. It reminds me of trying to deal with a hornet's nest. You may be able to disperse the hornets, but you will probably be terribly stung and receive nothing for your pain.”

Many historians have noted that after World War I we punished the vanquished. Most believe this caused World War II. After World War II we forgave and helped Germany and Japan rebuild which has resulted in mainly peaceful relations with those countries.

Synthesis Newsletter points out that “Real forgiveness, like going to Mars is something far easier to conceive than it is to put into practice. The logic brain might understand total forgiveness, but the human will has a colossal time actually practicing it.” The ability to forgive is a gift of God. We cannot create forgiveness. True forgiveness is beyond us, beyond our ability to control or summon into existence. Forgiveness is an ability God gives us.

The authors of *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Journey to Wholeness* interviewed people who were profoundly wronged. They found that the harder people tried to forgive the more resentful they felt. The harder they tried to be nice, or pretend it was over, the more hardhearted they ended up. “Only when their willfulness was replaced by “willingness” by just being open to the possibility of having resentment taken away by God did they see progress. It did not come easily. Sometimes it was one of those not-so-holy prayers, such as, ‘God, help that rotten SOB!’ But progress ensued if they remained open and honest. Those who had been victimized, but now had come to some real serenity about what had occurred to them, recognized themselves one day as having forgiven. There was not a specific act, no declaration of forgiveness, but it had evolved within them as they were willing to let go of the self-as-victim and give the pain to God. Furthermore, they discovered that the ability to forgive others was preceded by an understanding of oneself having been forgiven. What helped to pull them out of the mire of their self-pity was comprehending their own fallenness and their being loved in spite of their imperfection.”

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, “When you allow your enemy to stop being your enemy, all the rules change. Nobody knows how to act anymore, because forgiveness is an act of transformation. It does not offer the adrenaline rush of anger, nor the feeling of power that comes from a well established resentment. It is a quiet revolution, as easy to miss as a fist uncurling to become an open hand, but it changes people in ways anger only wishes it could.”

David Hockett wrote, “What a tragedy that we forfeit the gift of freedom because we are unable to allow the spirit of love to form us into a people who practice the abundant economy of forgiveness rather than the bankrupt market of vengeance, getting even and settling the score. ... Forgiveness is not forgetting. One cannot forgive that which is forgotten. Forgiveness involves telling each other the painful truth, not to hold something over the other person but to find a way forward that breaks the cycle of eye-for-an-eye violence in which we so often find ourselves trapped. Forgiveness is not about becoming a doormat and relishing the role of victim. Forgiveness is about being victorious, freed from the horrible things other might have done to us. Likewise, forgiveness is not a strategy for turning our enemies into our friends; it is instead a grateful response to what God has done for us. We forgive others as a way of saying “thank you” to God who in Christ has graciously forgiven us.”

Only forgiveness is able to break the cycle of violence. Forgiveness set us free from being defined by our past. Forgiveness set us free from the burdens of bitterness, anger and revenge.

Forgiveness transforms and makes a way for all to be healed. Only forgiveness can reconcile the world, our family, and usher in a time of peace and love for all.

Phillip Yancy, author of *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, was asked after the terrorist attacks, "Where is God at a time like this?" He answered with a question of his own, "Where is the church when it hurts? If the church is doing its job -- binding wounds, comforting the grieving, offering food to the hungry -- I don't think people will wonder so much where God is when it hurts. They'll know where God is: in the presence of God's people on Earth."

The Apostle Paul wrote **Romans 5:6-7** "**When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good.**" On 9/11 first responders didn't try to determine if a person was righteous or a sinner before rushing into the towers. They gave their lives for others. Perhaps the best way to honor them, and all who have sacrificed their lives for us, is to forgive and work for the healing of all people.

Jesus the only righteous judge on the cross said, **Luke 23:34** "**Forgive them!**". Jesus taught us to pray **Matthew 6:12** "**Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us.**" We all have been forgiven. We all have been give life. We are lamenting. God help us to forgive. Amen