

October 6, 2019

Lamentations 3: 19-26

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Love Never Ends, Mercies Never Cease”

A number of years ago, I was standing in the hallway of a hospital with the husband of a woman who was extremely ill. The complications of the numerous physical battles the wife was up against were mindblowing and it left all of us wondering what was coming next. That's when the husband looked at me and said, “I don't know how much more a body can take.” And then he said to me, “Why is God doing this to us?” It doesn't matter if you've been to seminary, have a theological education, know your bible or go to church, there are some questions that don't have answers and that was one of those moments. I remember placing a hand on his shoulder and we just stood there quietly, not knowing what words to say.

Preachers aren't supposed to be speechless. Lord knows, when we have a microphone we can go on for awhile. But, there are some experiences that leave all of us wondering. This morning we've turned to the small book of the bible that deals with questions that have no answers. We call the book, Lamentations. The laments are a collection of poems written in response to the darkest time in Hebrew history. That experience is known historically as, The Exile. This is when the strong military might of Babylonia descended from the north and crushed weaker Judah. Jerusalem was destroyed. Families were ripped apart. Many of the people were carried away into captivity where they were held for an entire generation. It was a dark and hopeless time. The people wondered what they'd done to deserve this kind of suffering. Some, like the great prophets of the faith, knew that actions always bring consequences but, still, the questions we sometimes ask in our personal lives were asked by a whole nation, as they cried tears by the waters of Babylon. “How much more can we take?” they asked. And, “Where is God in the midst of this unbearable hardship?” The Book of Lamentations is valuable to us because the poet gives us words when we don't know what to say. The poem says, “I'm afflicted...I'm homeless...my soul is at the bottom...my life is all wormwood and gall...” If we ever find ourselves at a place in life that can be described as “wormwood and gall” things can't be good. Harsh and bitter herbs, this is wormwood and gall. The poet gives us words when we don't have any or when we are reluctant to be fully honest about our life with God. “How much more can we take?” It's OK to ask these questions, as a people of faith. We should not be tentative to name our feelings before God. “How will we go on? And, where are you, God, when we need you most?”

If those times when life is all wormwood and gall is all we had, I doubt we would be here this morning. This is exactly the point of the gospel. We're never left with bitterness. We're never left in darkness. We're never alone. We gather today and every Sunday morning to be assured in the good news of the message of Jesus Christ. Christ connects us to the eternal goodness of God and reminds us that whatever struggle may be pressing us down in the moment it is not our end. The poet of the lament knew this, too. And so, with the same breath that described life so harshly the poet says, “I call this to mind...and I have hope...the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases...the Lord's mercies never come to an end...they are new every morning...and, great is your faithfulness, O God.” This shift from despair to hope happens for the poet when he remembers. God's steadfast love never ceases. The poet remembers God's promises. The poet calls to mind the way God has always led the people to a place of new life and strength. We aren't here because we pretend away the difficulties in life. We're here because in the midst of life's trials God sees us through. This is what Christ makes possible in us, a faith that lives with the questions that can't be answered, confident that nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Today, as we do so often, we receive the invitation to come to The Lord's Table. What makes this experience of communion this morning even more meaningful is our celebration of World Communion Sunday. Now, there's plenty in the world that concerns us. War and violence, political tensions and poverty, the stories of each day's news cycle can be like a dark cloud of worry. The church works for justice and peace because we know the world isn't all that it should be. I'll say again, if this was all we knew we might be tempted to throw our hands in the air and give up, but it's not the end of the story. God holds the world in divine hands, and our communion today connects us to one another, connects us to the Christian family around the world, and gives us the confidence to know that God's love never fails.

Just like with the poet, Holy Communion invites us to remember. Our remembering creates hope. Jesus told us that when we break the bread and drink the cup we are to remember him. Not just to remember that he shared a meal with his disciples but to remember him. Especially, we remember what Jesus has done by way of the cross. It was on the cross that Jesus looked to heaven and said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46) Jesus didn't pretend away his suffering. Jesus felt what we felt but then he showed us the power of God's saving love when as he breathed his last, he said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” (Luke 23:46) When life is hard or when the troubles of the world are heavy that's the time to commend our lives, once more, into

God's eternal care. We remember Jesus so we can live with Jesus. We remember Jesus so we can believe what we sing, "Great is thy faithfulness. Great is thy faithfulness. Morning by morning new mercies I see."

A short time after the husband and I stood in that hospital hallway, silent and wondering, we moved back into the room and went to the bed. He was on one side and I on the other, and this time we held hands, including her in the circle as we prayed. This time, we found the words to say. We prayed that we would be aware of God's presence and love. We prayed for strength and we prayed that we would remember God's promise for her and for us, that Christ is always with us, in this life and in the life to come. Our communion and worship today enable us to stand on the promises of God. We and the whole world are in God's hands. We will remember this, today and all the days of this week, the promise that God's steadfast love endures forever. Amen.