

SERMON: Lament

TEXT: Luke 13:31-35

My Aunt Beth was a wonderful, generous, fascinating person. She was passionate about social justice and always on a mission to love the unlovable. She never had any biological children, but she and her husband fostered and adopted six children of various ages and races. It seems that she went out of her way to take in children whom others did not want. At the very least, most of them were what we would now call “at risk” children.

The eldest was a boy whose disease of cerebral palsy had deformed his face and affected his speech and his vision. The next two were Native Americans, one was mixed raced, and the youngest boys were black. As you might imagine, this family was in constant struggle financially, and they were often victims of personal and institutional racism. Beth’s husband eventually had an affair and left her to raise these children alone. Their struggles multiplied, but she persevered. Of the six children, at least three have suffered with addiction, one is now estranged from his siblings as a result of mental illness, and one was murdered. Four of them recently enjoyed a happy reunion, sharing memories, making new memories, and expressing love and gratitude for their late mother.

Aunt Beth was also an eccentric woman with an odd sense of humor. I remember hearing a story about her when she was perhaps a teenager or a young adult. At the family dinner table, she was called upon by her mother to offer the blessing. Without hesitation, she bowed her head and prayed, “Jesus wept.” Apparently, she meant this as a joke and perhaps even an indication of her rebellion against religion. I now see it as a prophecy of sorts. A foreshadowing of her life to come.

*Jesus wept.* It is the shortest verse in the Bible, but full of meaning. Probably more than we will ever realize. We rush past it so quickly, never stopping to imagine anything beyond the obvious. We acknowledge that Jesus was fully human and grieved the death of his friend Lazarus just as deeply and tearfully as we grieve those we have loved and lost. And then we move on.

The words, *Jesus wept*, are not included in the scriptures we read today, but I was reminded of them when I read of Jesus’ *lament* over Jerusalem. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

I must admit that I have imagined this scene playing out like one of Shakespeare's tragedies, with a melodramatic actor in the role of Jesus speaking a soliloquy from a high balcony while looking down upon the audience as if they were the city. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem!"

There is such a quick change of emotion from how Jesus responds to Herod's threat against his life to this lament that I felt I really needed to dig in to understand what Jesus is talking about. We don't use the word *lament* very often in our world, so I looked it up to confirm its meaning. To lament is to mourn or to grieve deeply, to express sorrow or regret. There's an entire book in the Bible called Lamentations, which is devoted to expressing grief "over the destruction of Jerusalem, the Hebrew people's infidelity to God, and the punishment that comes at the hands of the Babylonians when his people turn from God."

I have a *Spiritual Formation Bible* which introduces the book of Lamentations with a reminder that "we can turn to God in times of anguish and pain. We can pour out our sorrow from the depths of our souls as we look for God's healing love. [But] turning to God also means taking responsibility for our actions, repenting of misdeeds and accepting the new life that God offers us."

Back to Jesus' words of lament over Jerusalem, one scholar explained:

“Jesus speaks in tones of abject disappointment and utter heartbreak at the refusal of his own people to hear and heed the summons of God to draw near, to gather, and to come home.... For Jesus, God's passionate dream, compassionate desire, and bold determination is to gather God's human children closer and closer in God's embrace and love. That mission and commitment is at the center of Jesus' work. Like a mother hen, God seeks to draw, embrace, include, and welcome God's children into the family of humanity that God has intended from the dawn of Eden itself.” (Michael B. Curry, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2)

I think it is interesting – though we shouldn't be surprised – that in response to a threat to his life and the very real tragic end that awaits him in Jerusalem, Jesus does not lament his own fate. He laments the fate of the people of Jerusalem, those who are blind to his purposes and who scatter like chicks when the mother hen is trying to protect them. Perhaps Jesus even regrets in some sense his own failure to convince them that he offers a better way. “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

But it was their unwillingness – and ours today – to listen and learn from Jesus that love is the way. Jesus has not failed us. We have failed Jesus. And Jesus laments.

I believe Jesus laments, Jesus weeps over the recent actions of the United Methodist Church, refusing to ordain or marry – thus refusing to welcome – people who identify as LGBT or transgender. One person who attended the conference, held in St. Louis just a few weeks ago, reported that she heard a heterosexual pastor try to explain his position to an LGBT pastor, “I love you; I just can’t accept you.”

And I believe Jesus laments, Jesus weeps over the mass murder of at least 50 people worshipping at two mosques in New Zealand. “For God so loved *the world* that he gave his only begotten Son.... Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen

gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing. See, your house is left to you.”

The season of Lent is a time to lament our unwillingness to follow Christ, our acts of unfaithfulness to God, and our sins of commission and omission. The wrong that we do, and the right that we neglect to do. But Lent is also a time to repent. After we recognize our sin and our worship of idols and false gods, we turn from it. We strive to “go and sin no more.”

It’s not easy. We are weak. We are so easily distracted. But we can get strength for our striving at this table. The Lord’s Table, where there is room for all, is where we receive forgiveness of our sins through the body and blood of Jesus. The Lord’s Table is where we become one with Christ. The Lord’s Table is where we become the Body of Christ. The Lord’s Table is where hope overcomes despair, where light overcomes darkness, where love overcomes lament.

May we be willing to come together as Christ calls us... to the glory of God.

AMEN.