

LOVE'S SORROW: Grieving Our Sin and Shame
Lamentations 1:1-12, 16
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I once visited with a mother who had twins under the age of two, was expecting another baby, and was still suffering with morning sickness. She kept asking God why she wasn't healed. At church the next Sunday, the congregation sang, "It Is Well With My Soul," and she did not sing. Was she wrong? You know, our worship and spiritual formation don't leave us much room to lament, to grieve, to struggle. Did you know that 40% of our Book of Psalms is lament, or songs of grief? Think about it. Crying is the first task we master when we are born! It's a sign of life! It's OK to cry!

But here's the truth: We all prefer less struggle and more snuggle. We want God's warm fuzzies, not life's pain. But we have to begin here, where we are, in pain. When we face tragedy, we can move into denial (it isn't happening); into blame (it's your fault); or into engagement--we roll up our sleeves and do the hard work of grief, mourning and sorrow. And grow through it.

When I was growing up in church, we always sang, "Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before!" A nice sentiment, but it isn't so. Some days, months, seasons are not sweeter than before. We have to be honest to say it. And God provides Lamentations as a corrective against this cheerleader theology. Someone called Lamentations the most tragic book in the Bible. The Babylonians had overrun Israel-Judah with a scorched-earth policy, burning and salting the fields, gouging out the eyes of leaders, carrying off people. The pain is deep and it is physical, emotional and spiritual.

Israel's grieved her sin and shame. First, her sin (vv. 5, 8). Yes, we have to take responsibility. But the reference here is to taking responsibility for national—not just individual---sins. Isn't part of our national crisis today because we need to come to grips with some of our national sins? Like what we did to the Native Americans. Or what about slavery, a sanctioned owning of other human beings? We have to be transparent.

And what about the gun violence, killing our children? I'm not wading into the politics, but the biblical aspect of our national sin. Surely the richest, most advanced country in the world can find solutions. And it begins with naming our sin and shame.

But Israel wasn't only grieving her sins. She was grieving her shame (v. 8). She was naked, with no place to hide. The graphic for our sermon series is a heart being ripped apart. Our shame isn't always about our own sins and poor choices; our shame is sometimes about what others have done to us, whether it is sexual assault, abandonment or some other injustice.

And what about the shame of war, the scarring to the human soul? Mental health experts are now working with Vietnam veterans as they struggle with PTSD. After they retire, they are now coming to grips with the pain. Besides PTSD, experts are now also talking about the moral injury of war, when we are called to do something that is against our ethics. They speak of the need to give voice to remorse, regret and renewal. But it can't come if we don't give it space.

To help us get started on this difficult Lenten journey, here are three suggestions, a take-home test for all of us: 1) Get honest with God—about your sin, pain and shame. We have to confess and be authentic. Sure. 2) Grow your compassion muscles. This week, when you encounter someone you don't understand or whose behavior does not measure up to your standards, say to yourself, "There is a pain in that person's life I know nothing about." How about this as a motto? Less judging/more mercy. 3) Ask yourself, "What needs fixing in my world?" If we do numbers one and two, we will have a better clue about number three, and our witness will be more credible and will be taken more seriously.

Walter Brueggemann wrote, "The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial and express hope in a society that lives in despair." In the midst of love's sorrow, this is what Christ calls us to. Amen!