



Practising healthy theology in the local church: Lamenting with those in pain and restoring hope

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Abstract

The loss of lament in the modern church has had serious consequences, including a lack of compassion for pain-bearers, the failure to challenge injustice, and essentially the loss of the church's mission: bringing hope into pain. This article suggests five ways to restore lament to the life of a church, to facilitate a healthy, caring community. First, "hard texts" must be included in the preaching and teaching calendar; second, the church must learn to stand with pain-bearers in corporate lament; third, worship songs must include opportunity for sustained lament; fourth, biblical laments should be read regularly and used by individuals to compose their own laments; and fifth, lament rituals (for regular and special situations) must be built into the rhythm of church life. If such practices can be restored, those who carry pain will once again receive the gift of hope and communal bonds will be strengthened.

Keywords

lament; worship; liturgy; compassion; injustice

1. What is lament?

Matt Lynch (2017a) claims that "lament is the brutally honest and confrontational expression of distress before God" [my emphasis]. Gilliard (nd) expands this idea: Lament is "uncensored communion with God – visceral worship [my emphasis] where we learn to be honest, intimate and humble before God ... [It] is both an acknowledgment that things are not as they should be and an anguished wail, beckoning the Lord to intervene with righteousness and justice".

The essence of lament is the relationship with God, and the lamenter's refusal to give up the relationship, even as he/she grapples with God about

God's part in the difficulty being experienced. In the lament psalms, the dominant complaint is the absence of response from God (Westermann 1981:178).¹ O'Connor (2002:85) argues that this is also the root of the problem in Lamentations, but she sees God's speechlessness as sometimes necessary. Indeed, three possible reasons for God's silence are apparent. First, it allows the human voices to fully express their pain, uninterrupted.² This is in line with Herman's (1992) first step towards trauma healing: sufferers being able to express themselves and be agents, presenting the difficult experience from their perspective. A second possibility is that only when wounds are exposed and visible to others is there the possibility of healing (O'Connor 200:86). This implies exposing the pain to God and also to others, which happens when lament is publicly expressed: others can no longer claim ignorance as an excuse for their non-involvement. Indeed, public communal lament binds a community together in solidarity, enabling a "public expression of sorrow, anguish, or suffering that is related to a community's relationship with God" (Katongole 2014:3).

The third possible reason for God's silence is more profound and goes to the heart of the relationship between the lamenter and God, and to the grounds for hope. Katongole (2017:48) refers to this when he defines lament as "a way of standing and of hoping in the midst of ruins". He recognises that underlying lament is risk, challenging the current relationship, to facilitate the emergence of a new relationship with God. He understands that God's silence is often because God is entering into the suffering of the people, becoming vulnerable and experiencing their pain. This is understood more clearly in the light of the NT. When Jesus cries out to God in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:39), he receives no answer (Soelle 1975:79). And when he cries out in agony on the cross (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46), Jesus experiences the "speechlessness of God". But Jesus' anguish is understood to be experienced too by God. And for Katongole, God's identifying with those in pain gives rise to the possibility of hope. The Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff noted the same truth in his lament for his son. He writes (1987:71,80,88): "Back and forth, lament and

1 Consequently, many of the petitions in prayers of lament are for God to "arise" or "wake up" (Broyles 1989, 71–72).

2 As Kierkegaard prays: "Do not let us forget that You also then speak when You are silent."

faith, faith and lament ... But instead of hearing an answer, we catch sight of God himself scraped and torn ... we discern the anguish of God. By this anguish [we] are comforted.”

Commenting on Katongole’s (2017) book, Maluleke (2017) notes that for Africans, “lament is the language they use to make sense out of senselessness.” He opines that practices of hope and lament in Africa are probably more complicated than Katangole’s mainly Catholic template allows for. However, Katongole’s linking of lament and hope is one that has been touched upon by other African scholars. For example, Ackermann (1998: 88) highlights the need for “ethical imagination” in order that those not suffering can be prepared to stand alongside ‘the others’ who are suffering. This speaks to the need for public lament. As Rah (2015:44,47) notes, a public dimension to lament brings a depth of honesty not only before God but also before each other. And if the community stands together with those in pain, significant healing can result (Dickie 2020). Indeed, having one’s pain acknowledged by others is an important aspect of overcoming trauma and has been shown to lead to the emergence of hope (Herman 1992:155).

These understandings of lament are drawn from the biblical concept of “lament” which differs from the common usage.³ Biblical lament typically includes the following elements:⁴ an address to God, complaint, requests (including often a request for justice to be executed against the enemy), and affirmations of faith (remembering God’s action in the past or God’s promises). This last-named element, an affirmation of faith or hope, needs further discussion.

Westermann’s view (1981:75) is that individual laments in the Scriptures include “a glance beyond the present situation” so that “the cry to God ... is always between petition and praise”. The notion is that God has heard the one praying, and this has transformed the problem to cause for praise. Even though there may not be a material change in the situation of difficulty, the lamenter senses God has intervened and responded to the

3 In common speech, “lament” typically only refers to complaint, and usually complaint made to other people.

4 See Westermann 1981:261–266, 55–60; Broyles 1989:117–126, 39–42, 220.

need (Westermann 1981:80–81). However, Broyles notes that the motif of “reference to God’s earlier saving deeds” (which usually forms the basis of the affirmation) is only found in laments against God.⁵ Thus he proposes that their function is not to extol God but to show how God’s present action contradicts his traditional praiseworthy manner with God’s people, as motivation for present action (Broyles 1989:42–43). Such “affirmations” are not to bolster the faith of the lamenter, but to remind God of his promises, establishing the grounds for complaint and serving as a summons for YHWH to actualize his earlier saving deeds (Broyles 1989:220).

Broyles’ view underlines the challenge inherent in a lament to God about God. The level of honesty and vulnerability on the part of the sufferer means that he/she will not withhold anything from God, even the most hideous and painful parts of life (Duff 2005:13), and even a “disguised” challenge to God’s supreme power. However, the fact that the lamenter makes the effort to engage with God shows that lament is an act of faith. It is a declaration that only God has the power to truly mend the pain and brokenness being experienced. By engaging God in one’s anger and anguish and risking the relationship (as Katongole’s work illuminates), a new and stronger relationship with God may emerge, out of which hope can arise.

2. The loss of lament in the modern church

In biblical times, laments were often set to music for the community to sing. We see this in the superscripts of many of the lament psalms (e.g. Pss 13, 54–59). Even Ps 22, which Jesus cited in his lament on the cross, and Ps 88, the darkest of all psalms, are written ‘for the choir director’, indicating they were songs for the whole community (Lynch 2017c).

In the 15th–16th century, Martin Luther believed that lament was a useful practice for the believer, but that it should be balanced by faith and hope (Billman and Migliore 1999:52–55).

His “theology of the cross” gave space for pain to be acknowledged and expressed. John Calvin also allowed believers to lament, within limits,

5 The exception is Ps 83 where it simply adds dramatic effect to the petition.

advocating that they should also be patient and submit to suffering (Billman and Migliore 1999:58–59).

The singing of psalms (including laments) continued well into the eighteenth century (Polman 2001, 91–94). In the 19th century, there was a move toward hymns as a result of the popularity of hymn-writers such as Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, and John Newton. Consequently, laments were no longer sung by most mainstream Protestant churches although African-American Christians continued to compose spirituals and “sorrow songs”. In the 1980s, there was a move towards praise and worship choruses. Leaders of this movement felt that lament should be restricted to private, spoken prayer in a small group (Polman 2001:99).

Gilliard (2017) notes that “Somewhere along the way, we modern Christians began thinking of lament as optional instead of a required practice of the faith.” Rah (2015:66–67) suggests that this arises from a failure to recognise the reality of suffering. Praise is elevated, and pain if it is mentioned, is dealt with through intercession and petition. But the sufferer has no place within the church to express his/her deep distress. Consequently, the church fails to offer that which she uniquely can give: opportunity for sufferers to express grief, despair, and anguish *in the company of others and in the context of faith in God* (Duff 2005:4). Rather we are taught that true faith in God mitigates such strong feelings and expressions of sorrow and rage. Thus, lament disappears, and the church fails to fulfil the ministry to which she is called. As Katongole (2014:4) notes, “The church’s mission and gift in the world is connected to her ability to enter into the experience of lament with hope.” If she denies the practice of lament and of weeping, she becomes like the world around her, a society that has “forgotten the experience of weeping”.

Indeed, our Western society is characterised by two inter-related elements which are contrary to the call of the church. First there is a culture of individualism which makes us think only of ourselves. As Pope Francis notes, we become insensitive to the cries of others (Hall 1976). Related to this is a focus on “my personal well-being” and an inability to deal with suffering, or an *avoidance* of suffering at any cost (Rah 2015:66). Hall (1976:16) observes, “The pathos of our condition is not that we have failed, but that we cannot bring ourselves to contemplate our failure.” To the

extent that the church has identified with the positive outlook of modern society, it has lost its redemptive force and ability to bring good news to the hurting. The only way the church can recover its reason-for-being is to experience the cross (Katongole 2014:6). This requires the church to become a “community of lament”.

Thus Hall (1976, 16) makes a startling assertion: “The task of Christian theology in our time and place must be to help men [sic] *enter into that darkness* [my emphasis]. Not to offer them refuge from it ... rather, to provide a way into the darkness.” Moltmann’s theology⁶ is similar: a “plea for Christians to enter into the suffering that God has already entered into, and not remain passive (apathetic) observers”. God is involved in, and affected by, the suffering of the world, and thus we too must enter in (Katongole 2014:7–9). It is lament that calls the church back to this location “within the cross”, and to her essential mission. Only a theology rooted in the cross can offer anything to the suffering. As Katongole observes, a theology of glory “imagines that it has something to give” and so is unable to receive the pain of the hurting. True community, the aim of Christian social ethics, is found only at the foot of the cross (Hall 1976:152).

Misunderstanding with respect to the role of the church and the need to provide space for lament is compounded by various practices which exclude lament from the thinking of the congregation. This is apparent particularly in the avoidance of Scripture passages which deal with lament, and in the exclusion of elements of lament from the songs sung in worship.

2.1 Neglect of Scripture texts dealing with lament

Billman and Migliore (1999:23) observe that modern Christians will “readily use the Bible for comfort, instruction, and praise ... [but] seldom look to it as a resource to voice their pain, grief, and anger.” Pastors also avoid preaching on lament texts. Pemberton (2012:131) posits: “The reason that many psalms and prayers of lament find no place in our churches is because we have chosen to live protected lives in insulated communities. Our lack of solidarity with those in need is what causes us to wonder why these prayers are in the Bible and question who would ever need them.”

6 See Wall nd.

A refreshing contrast to this is seen in the teaching of Soong-Chan Rah. When he planted an urban church in Cambridge, MA, he began with a 6-week series of sermons based on the book of Lamentations. This offered a critique of success-centred triumphalism and opened up new ways to encounter “the other”. Indeed, it resulted in the community being shaped with a “radically countercultural perspective”, ready to challenge the status quo and cry out against existing injustices.

2.2 The lack of lament in modern hymnals and contemporary worship songs⁷

Rah (2015:22) notes that 13–19% of modern hymnals include hymns with an aspect of lament. The percentage is much lower for the songs sung in most churches today. Strickler (2015, 49) found that among “Contemporary Christian Worship” songs, not one could be classified as including biblical lament. Lynch (2017a) made a similar study, looking at the “charts” popular in the USA, UK, and Australia. In the CCLI praise charts,⁸ only 3 of the top 100 songs included any element of lament, and of these, none “lingered there for long”. As he notes, there seems to be a discomfort with negative emotions. For example, a Bethel⁹ song includes words suggesting lament (e.g. *Oh the peace that comes when I’m broken and undone*) but the references to pain are “romanticized and spiritualized ... Being ‘broken’ or ‘undone’ is pitched as an ideal state. This is not lament” (Lynch 2017a). Even when a song includes “a cry” (e.g. Brian Doerksen’s song, “Faithful One”), it is not from a place of desperation; the need has already been met, and so the lament is “greyed out”.¹⁰

Other songs seem to “dangle the raw emotions of pain, disappointment, and complaint” but then the singer draws back (Lynch 2017a). Solutions are offered too quickly. The pain is not experienced. There is no opportunity to journey through the darkness of night. For example, Matt Maher’s song

7 Even modern hymnals show an average of only 13–19% laments (Rah 2015:22).

8 CCLI = Christian Copyright Licensing International, one of the biggest organizations controlling the use of Christian music.

9 Bethel is very popular contemporary church in California.

10 Doerksen is moving in the right direction and has consistently called for more lament in worship (Lynch 2017a, n3). However, worship leaders need to courageously follow biblical lament “uncensored”.

evokes the wrestling match between Jacob and the Angel of the LORD, but immediately skips on to the still waters of Ps 23. The person in pain has no time to resonate with the wrestle, before it is all over (in the song, but not for the individual trying to find words to express his/her pain) (Lynch 2017a). Why can songs not linger in the unresolved, and from there, cry out to God? Lynch (2017a) compares this tendency (to gloss over pain and arrive at resolution), as similar to many Christians' attitude to the Passion of Jesus, rushing from Friday to Sunday without considering the agony of Saturday (Begbie 2007:279). Pain is often considered too uncomfortable for the person to pause and allow the emotion to sink into the psyche. But, without this lingering reflection, the pain remains unvoiced and untreated.

Lynch (2017a) concludes that: "Worship leaders have only begun to walk around the edges of the pastoral significance of the lament song." Teaching is definitely required so that worship leaders can grasp the theological and pastoral import of lament and begin to intentionally include aspects of lament in weekly worship. Strickler (2015:102) maintains that it is not only worship leaders who need introductory teaching on lament, but also the congregants.

3. Consequences of the lack of lament

The lack of corporate lament results in several problems in the life of the church: First, broken and hurting people are not helped. The corporate body may express jubilant joy but the individual is left to deal with his/her personal pain alone (Hicks 2005:78). Faith becomes an individual and private matter. As Michael Card (2005:29) observes, the lack of lament thus separates people from one another and from God.

Second, worship is shallow as God is not recognised for all that God is. Card (2005:21) believes that "Lament is one of the most direct paths to true praise ... In fact, lament is not a path to worship, but the path of worship." It opens new vistas of God that are not possible in the one-dimensional relationship of praise. Wolterstorff (1987:26) experienced this after losing his son: "I shall look at the world through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see." Archbishop Christopher Munzihirwa, who was martyred during the troubles in Rwanda and Zaire, often reflected on this truth: "There are things which can be seen only by eyes that have

cried” (Allen 2013:49). When we are honest and vulnerable before God, we see new things: about God, about ourselves, and about life.

Third, issues of social justice are ignored or not dealt with effectively. Brueggemann (1992:22–44) asserts that a recovery of biblical lament is vital in order that the community will “embrace the pain of the excluded”. If we cannot acknowledge and lament our own losses, how can we identify with those who are treated unjustly? Similarly, a lack of the practice of lament means that we don’t know how to respond to national tragedies, and so can appear uncaring and unconcerned about social action (Hicks 2005:79). Moreover, the failure to bring justice issues to God results in them then disappearing from the public sphere (Brueggemann 1986:64). The church thus fails to exercise her covenantal responsibility (Lynch 2017b), to resist injustice and stand in the gap for the abused and afflicted.

3.1 Rethinking “lament”

In contrast, lament facilitates spiritual authenticity for the individual, and transforms the community. With regard to the first, Scott Ellington (2008:15) suggests that lament enables one to hold in tension “beliefs about God” and “experiences about God” and so live with spiritual authenticity. For example, Wolterstorff (2019) wrote concerning the untimely death of his son: “I did not shy away from voicing my lament over his death. I joined the psalmist in lamenting without explaining.”

Second, lamentation is a liturgical act that reorients and transforms us. But more than that, it is a revolutionary act, breaking open pain (Gilliard 2017). As an example, Katongole (2014:9) refers to Pope Francis visiting the island of Lampedusa, (the primary European entry point for migrants, mainly from Africa). For Francis, it is lament which “presses the church into various engagements with, for, and on behalf of the poor” (Katongole 2014:10). Through his actions he establishes the connection between lament and compassion (Katongole 2014:11), clarifying that compassion is not merely a private emotion but “a blazing fierceness ... that has an efficacy for transformation” (Johnson 1992:270).

4. Restoring lament to the life of the church

In today's world, we are continuously exposed to pain and brokenness. We learn to live with the “white noise” of the sufferings of others, and to move on in our own lives, numbed and insensitive to their pain. Indeed, if we are to show empathy and reflect Christ's compassion, we need to slow down and intentionally give time and presence to those in pain. This includes two aspects (Gilliard 2017): First, we need to remember those situations in the past where we failed to lament. We need to repent thereof and commit to being more sensitive going forward. And second, the practice of lament needs to be incorporated as a regular part of the life of the church.

There are many ways in which this can be done. Billman and Migliore (1999:134) propose that at least one element of every service should provide such an opportunity. This could be in a prayer or Bible reading, or through the music or teaching. However, before “liturgical structures” can be introduced into a congregation to provide for lament, biblical teaching must be provided (Pembroke 2010:63; Rah 2015:67). This should not only encourage people that biblical lament is normal and appropriate in the Christian life but should also give instruction on active listening and how to express understanding and compassion. If public lament is to be helpful to sufferers, listeners need to be able to express presence and solidarity with those lamenting (Rah 2015:67).

Next, five practical steps are delineated, which could be incorporated into the rhythm of the church, to restore a balanced understanding of the Christian life.

4.1 Teaching and preaching

Many commentators today are becoming aware that certain awkward biblical passages (e.g. Ps 88, Lam, Eccl, the whole book of Job) are avoided in the preaching calendar and the lectionary. However, topics of sermons need to also include the hard passages which deal with suffering and anger and pain. As Gilliard (nd) points out, an exploration of such “dark” topics exposes blind spots, giving us corrective revelation. Moreover, we learn that “all growth does not take place in the sunlight” (Chittiser nd).

With regard to more specific understanding of the role of lament, Billman & Migliore (1999:137–138) suggest that teaching could begin with a small

group of interested persons. These might be pain-bearers themselves, or those who love and care for those in deep pain. Such support-groups could be established in the church, not just for sufferers to “talk to one another” but also to bring their pain to God, in lament prayer. As they learn to acknowledge their own pain before God, they will be open to hearing the lament of other sufferers, and to stand in solidarity with them.

4.2 Practice of corporate lament (standing with those who suffer)

Many pain-bearers are much perplexed with their condition and context, and in their extreme need often do cry out to God. But what is the responsibility of others in the church who are comfortable and not needing to lament? Mary Kate Morse (2017) gives a personal example of how she was challenged to “look where Jesus’ eyes are looking” and to stand in the gap for, and with, others who are suffering. Both of these acts – interceding effectively and standing in solidarity with those who lament – require that we have compassion for others whose lives may not directly touch ours. We need to be able to enter into the pain of the other, to “weep with those who weep” (Harrichand 2014:118–119). In the words of Pope Francis, we need “the grace to weep ... and be broken open by suffering” (Hickey nd). Indeed, “The ability to sit with suffering, to recognize how painful it is, and simply to be there ... is an enormous gift. The simple attention-filled presence of a listener is itself a form of comfort” (Johnson-Barrett 2005, 335).

Rebekah Eklund (2012:256–257) notes that forming “lamenting-with” relationships is an important component of the church learning to lament. One way this can be done is to have a group of sufferers lead the congregation in a prayer that allows them to list their pain and complaints, and for the congregation to respond with prayers of affirmation. In our church in Cape Town, we did this successfully with a group of refugees who are on the fringes of the church. Giving them space within the corporate body to bring their particular frustrations and needs to God, with affirmation from the congregation, was life-giving and unity-building for all (Dickie 2019).

Lament might also become a regular part of corporate prayer by including in the prayers of intercession verses from applicable lament psalms. Or the communal prayer might consist of a lament psalm, with congregants

invited to intersperse (aloud or silently) their own personal prayers in line with the lament.

4.3 Introduction of worship songs which include sustained lament

Some modern composers are beginning to base worship songs on lament psalms. For example, Shane and Shane¹¹ include Ps 13 in their albums. Their lyrics follow the biblical text closely except they add the refrain “I will wait on You” which does somewhat ameliorate the agony. Another group which seeks to perform psalms, without removing the difficult verses of lament, is “SHIYR Poets”. Each psalm is rendered in its entirety, singing in union with all who suffer. Audiences find the music honest and meditative, and deeply comforting.¹²

Strickler (2015:97) has composed a song from Ps 3, with the lyrics following the biblical text closely. The first verse of the song is the complaint portion of the psalm. The second verse is the petitions (except he converts the request for justice against the enemies to a petition for their salvation). The words giving affirmation of faith form the chorus and are repeated several times. In terms of instrumentation, he chose a minor key, to indicate lament. He also restricted the notes to just four for the lament section, thereby mirroring the sense of feeling restricted. Before the chorus, he has a rising pitch, to evoke hope. The chorus has a wider range of movement and more rhythmic variation, symbolizing the hope and freedom accruing to those who trust in God’s grace. This song begins to show what talented musicians can offer to the contemporary church.

4.4 Reading and composing (biblical) laments

The psalms of lament can help pain-bearers in several ways. First, reading biblical laments is a way for them to express themselves when it is difficult to find the words to say to God (Harrichand 2014, 116). Wolterstorff (2019) notes how he battled to express his pain after losing his 25-year-old son: “In this dark place, I found myself drawn to the psalms of lament. They spoke *for* me. Their words became my words.” Using the words of the psalmist

11 Shane (Barnard) and Shane (Everett) lead worship at the Watermark church in Dallas. They are also seeking to equip worship leaders through an online training school. See <https://theworshipinitiative.com/>

12 Their first two recordings are called “Songs for the Journey, Vol 1 and Vol 2.

also enables sufferers to recognise that they are not the first to have such feelings. This frees them to express themselves without fear of being criticised (Duff 2005:10). Moreover, as the words are spoken to another, the suffering is de-privatized and it is “heard” (Arnold 1982:163–166), one of the critical steps for healing to arise (Herman 1992:155).

Duff (2005, 8–9) suggests that “A psalm of lament should be read every week in church in the same way that many of us are accustomed to reading a prayer of confession.” These prayers could come directly from Scripture or be composed by the prayer coordinator, taking into account recent events or contemporary situations (Pembroke 2010:64). The congregation should become habituated to the inclusion of not only our confession of sin, profession of faith, and bringing of praise, but also the expression of our sorrow, frustration, anger, and anguish before God. If this has its own particular “slot” in the weekly liturgy, it would be recognised as an essential element of worship (Duff 2005:9). Moreover, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2014:55) maintains that even if a contemporary reader finds no identification with a psalm of lament, he/she should read it as a prayer anyway, on behalf of those whose experience is represented in the psalm.

Apart from reading lament psalms from the Scriptures, it is also helpful for sufferers to compose their own laments. By including the features of biblical lament, such personal laments have been found to be very therapeutic (Dickie 2018). As Brueggemann (1984:54) notes, the very structure of biblical lament facilitates healing: “The form leads the speaker into, through, and out of the darkness”.

The typical features of biblical lament are 1) an address to God, 2) complaint, 3) petition (including petitions for justice against “enemies”), and 4) affirmations of trust. Two aspects of biblical lament need to be stressed. First, it is important that the pain-bearer be able to bring all of his/her emotions to God (including anger) for “Anger is not contrary to faith ... but an inescapable response to loss” (Mitchell and Anderson 1983:79). Through the lament, particularly the request for God to execute justice, the sufferer hands over retribution and is freed emotionally to be able to forgive and pray for the “enemy”.

Second, an important aspect of biblical lament is the inclusion of affirmations of God’s blessings in the past, or an acknowledgement of God’s

character and commitment to those within the covenant. In the midst of difficulties, the pain-bearer needs to pause and take time to remember past blessings (Arnold 1982:163–167). This allows hope to arise and can turn the lamenter's attitude significantly. Even though the problem might not have been removed, the pain-bearer has renewed "courage to continue", finding a way forward despite the negative experience.

Once a person has composed his/her own lament, the responsibility of the community around is to listen, and to acknowledge the person's pain. As Wolterstorff (1987:34) expresses it: "What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close." Indeed, the listener needs to "come close" and enter into the experience. There is no need to offer words, for as Hauerwas (1987:34) notes Christians have no solution to the problem of suffering. It is God alone who can give hope to the one in pain. Thus, the church must refuse to give false hope but also avoid the cynical view that there is no hope (Duff 2005:12).

4.5 Establish lament rituals (for personal and communal lament)

Pembroke (2010:63) calls for regular opportunities for lament in church meetings. Apart from regular weekly space for lament (mentioned in the former sections), there could be monthly services or opportunity within services already reflective of the church year (for those involved in liturgical worship expressions). In the event of national tragedies or disaster, ecumenical cooperation would be helpful to provide combined lament opportunities for larger groups (Baglyos 2009:263).

Karen Hickey, a Canadian pastor, gives an example of how a church responded to the news of 39 migrant workers found dead in a transport truck in San Antonio. At the church's weekly "Place to Listen" concert, musicians played a piece especially composed in remembrance of this tragedy. Daniel Brandes, the composer, aimed to provide a place where lamentation and healing could meet, and where people could "linger together, and alone, and 'alone-together'". In this way, the suffering of those 39 people was "held, honoured. They didn't just pass out of this world unnoticed, without compassion." As Hickey notes, "In the breaking open of our hearts, something is made more right, we are made more human."

Another ritual that Hickey describes was one that included particular individual concerns, in a communal environment. People were invited to bring to mind one particular burden for lament, be it “specific people, places ... that are endangered or have known suffering and devastation”. While music played quietly in the background, people allowed themselves, each privately and yet corporately, to enter into the pain of that situation. Then, as an expression of grief, they were invited to move forward and put some salt into a bowl of water, a symbol of their tears joining with the other tears that had been, and were being, wept. Each person was encouraged to name aloud the particular burden for which he/she was lamenting, for “in the naming we are invoking God’s mercy”.

In these ways, lament can become a normal part of church life, and those suffering will have space to authentically deal with their pain.

5. Conclusion

A study of lament will impact the way we worship, pray, and do pastoral care, and will influence what we believe about God and how we think theologically (Brown and Miller 2005:xvi). While loss and suffering have always marked human experience, the threat of violence, ranging from domestic abuse to gang conflict, from acts of terrorism to the sophisticated attacks of a superpower, has redefined the context of Christian prayer, theological reflection, and witness, all over the world (Brown and Miller 2005:xiv). Consequently, we need to provide space in worship for attention to these social realities.

Lament asks us to feel. It is a costly act, costly and yet crucial, for it unleashes compassion and engenders solidarity. It joins us to God’s compassion, and thus is finally a pathway to hope (Hickey nd). Moreover, because lament links suffering people with God, it enables them (and others standing in union with them) to worship God, recognizing that God is worthy, big enough to deal with our pain. Indeed, bringing our deepest emotions to God is the highest form of acknowledging God’s worth-ship.

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