

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA July 30, 2023

Lament

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we're going to step away from the gospel of Matthew and focus on the text for today from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Nothing against this section of Matthew, but we will find that the parables included in today's gospel reading are mostly reiterations of previously shared themes. Plus, Paul expresses some rather profound theology in the Romans text for today that is worth exploring!

I feel as though I must provide a caveat before preaching on Paul given that Lutherans have a sometimes overly strong attachment to him: Paul gets a lot right, but he gets plenty wrong too and we worship Christ, not Paul! There, caveat over.

Right off the bat in today's reading Paul gives us this beautiful thought: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."¹ These are powerful words! But they are made even more powerful when we consider those to whom they are written.

The early church in Rome experienced all sorts of persecution and oppression. It lived in the heart of the Roman Empire and faced all the pressure that went along with that. Cultural pressure to assimilate to Roman society, even if that meant idol-worship. Political pressure that saw this small group as an easy scapegoat for the woes of the average Roman citizen. Religious pressure that viewed Christianity as backwards and provincial.

With this context in mind, we can see how theologians like Sylvia C. Keesmaat and Brian J. Walsh argue that the book of Romans should be approached, not as a "narrowly 'theological' reading," but instead as a letter of lament written to communities suffering under empire, and not as an

¹ Romans 8:26 (NRSVUE)

attempt by Paul to systematize early theology.² Viewed through that lens, we will also find that this lament reaches its crescendo here in chapter 8. We heard just last week from this chapter: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.”³

Back to verse 26: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” The word translated as “weakness” in this sentence could also be reasonably translated as “persecutions.” And if we track down all the Psalm references in Chapter 8 (and elsewhere in Romans) we will find that Paul cites psalms of lament almost exclusively.⁴ Paul is inviting the church in Rome to lament...to grieve in the midst of its suffering.

A lament is a deep and obvious expression of grief over something that is drastically wrong. We lament many different things, but in the end all lament is an acknowledgement of wrongness, of things not being as they were created to be. A reminder that Luther taught that being a theologian of the cross starts by calling a thing what it is. Lament then, could be considered grief over seeing the brokenness of the world, and ourselves, for what it is. In this way the practice of lament also becomes a practice of truth-telling.

Grief then can be an entry point to repentance. To course-correction. In *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times*, Soong-Chan Rah argues that the American church avoids lament, and that lament is a critical component of Christian faith. What would it mean for our worship to lean more heavily into lament – lament for creation, for the excesses of the world, for the brokenness in the world? Bonhoeffer asks, “If the church is not for the world, then what is it for?”

The Way of Christ is a way of truth, which means it is also, at least occasionally, a Way of lament too. For we cannot confront the truth about the world, and about ourselves, without acknowledging our own pain and brokenness. The church needs to be better at asking “Where does it hurt?” as opposed to things like “What do you believe?”

Where do you hurt right now? What grief or pain are you carrying? Can you acknowledge your pain? Could you lament your suffering? Can you imagine

² Keesmaat, S. C., & Walsh, B. J. (2019). *Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice*. Brazos Press.

³ Romans 8:22

⁴ cf Romans 8:36 quoting Psalm 44:22,

what it might be like to not hurt anymore? What would it be like to be free of your pain? What would the world be like without all the suffering and brokenness?

This is the necessity of lament. For it is only once we acknowledge our pain, or the pain of others, or the pain of creation, that we can then begin to address it. Paul spoke of this in our reading last week where he said “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?”⁵ In world of suffering and pain, Paul invites the church in Rome, and us, to hope. When all we can see is evil and persecution, hope allows us to imagine a different world. But we can’t get there unless we’ve gone through the truth-telling of lament.

Unfortunately, spiritual maturity and wholeness seems to come about most reliably through suffering. But it makes a great deal of sense when you stop to think about it. Suffering, grief, lament, however you want to think about that sort of brokenness, forces us to see more of the world than we might want. It’s only when we’re confronted with the difficult truths that suffering and lament show us that we can begin to make the changes in ourselves that will lead to less suffering in the world. And it’s only after we’ve done the work on ourselves that we can create the space for others to do their work. And when enough people have seen the truth provided by lament and then moved to hoping for something different...well...that’s when amazing things begin to happen.

Throughout all of this we are never alone. Not only does verse 26 promise that the Spirit is with us and for us, but it promises that the Spirit intercedes for us. Even when we cannot see our need for lament, even when we look away from the brokenness of the world...the Spirit sighs. The Spirit calls us back to reality without words. Then the Spirit prompts and guides. Because, while lament is necessary, we are not meant to live in lament. Rather, we are called to imaginative hope. Hope focused on asking others, and the world, “Where does it hurt?” so that we can address the hurt out of hope for a world without pain.

Lament is necessary. Painful, certainly, but necessary. For we will never be able to join in God’s Kingdom work until we see where the work needs to be done. Followers of the Way of Christ are called to join others, and the world, in lament. Then, once we know where the hurt lies, we can begin to imagine

⁵ Romans 8:24

how to heal it. And heal it we can, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁶ And with the love of God at work in us and through us, there is no amount of healing we cannot accomplish in this world. Amen.

⁶ Romans 8:38-39