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Luke 13:31-35

SACRED LAMENTATIONS

On a recent road trip, my family and I drove through Williamsport, Pennsylvania—whose claim to fame, in case you didn't know, is that it is the site of the Little League World Series. We drove right passed the stadium where each year the championship baseball games among teams of children ages 9-12 from all over the world are played and televised on major networks. Sometimes I have happened to catch the broadcast of the Little League World Series on TV and I have been struck by how incredibly talented these children are at baseball and, in most cases, how poised they are in the face of what has to be a very stressful and intense experience. But every once in a while, after a team loses a game or when the coach pulls a young pitcher from the mound, every so often in the face of failure or defeat, one of the young players will burst into tears. They are, after all, children. It brings to mind that line Tom Hanks made famous in the movie, *A League of Their Own*, when he played the coach and one of his female team members burst into tears. "Crying? There's no crying in baseball!" Well, apparently, sometimes there *is* crying in baseball.

What makes the idea of crying in baseball humorous is that we typically relegate the shedding of tears to the private spheres of our lives. Crying right in public, when carrying out a public activity, giving in to our emotions right there in public, is not something we are accustomed to seeing. Tears embarrass us--other people's tears as well as our own. And so we often try to hide our sorrow, our tears, from other people. We save our tears for the privacy of our bedrooms. We are often uneasy letting other people see our sorrow and pain. And notice that when we do, notice how often we will apologize for doing so.

But Jesus doesn't seem to hide his sorrow or his tears. He weeps right out in the open for all to see. When we catch up with Jesus today, he and his disciples have begun to head to Jerusalem where Jesus anticipates he will face his own death. He is not *yet* in Jerusalem, only heading that way. But in anticipation of his arrival in that city, Jesus breaks forth into a lament. A lament is a cry of sorrow and pain. Our passage today does not tell us whether Jesus shed actual tears or not. But his lament is nevertheless an expression of deep sorrow and emotion. A lament is really your heart crying.

In just a few more chapters, the writer of Luke's gospel tells us that when Jesus is nearly at Jerusalem and sees it off in a distance, "he wept over it, saying 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.'" So, Jerusalem clearly evoked strong emotions in Jesus—emotions that led him to openly weep. And so it is not a stretch to imagine that during his lament in today's passage, that he quite possibly shed actual tears. At the very least, he publically made visible his sorrow.

Knowing that Jerusalem will be the site of his own death, it would be understandable for Jesus to cry out in distress and fear for his life and the brutality that awaits him there in that great city. But in our passage Jesus is not crying for himself. Instead, he cries for the people of 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!"

Jesus laments for Jerusalem! He cries for the people of the very city that will inflict mortal injury upon him. We should consider that the city of Jerusalem is symbolic of all humanity, of all people. We are that city of Jerusalem--God's holy people who are often misguided, unwise, foolish, and selfish. Jesus' lament is for us. And he speaks tenderly about

wanting to protect us from harm. And he offers this beautiful image of wanting to protect us the way a mother hen will try to protect her brood of chicks from the dangers of this world. The hen will open up her wings to gather her chicks under them, to shield them from danger. It's interesting that in choosing a metaphor for God's protective care, Jesus did not pick something like a lion. Instead, he chose a hen—a mother animal who herself is vulnerable to the very real dangers around her, but who will nevertheless sacrifice her own life to shield her beloved ones from harm. As the crucifixion will reveal, Jesus is that hen.

And yet, what grieves Jesus is that the chicks are not willing to enter the safety of God's wings. We, her chicks, scurry out from beneath her wings, oblivious to the dangers that exist beyond. We, her chicks, stubbornly pursue our own agendas even if they mean harm to ourselves or our planet, and we resist living in the security of God's love and God's way. We don't want to forgive. We don't want to sacrifice if it's not convenient. We don't want to care for the stranger. We are attracted to all the beautiful material things around us. We are attracted to status and wealth and comforts.

And Jesus wants to protect us from all that is harmful to us—those harmful forces that come from outside of ourselves, and those harmful forces that grow within ourselves. And yet we are not willing. And because Jesus loves us, he raises his lament of sorrow. And he weeps for us.

I wonder how many of us were ever taught this image of God—a God who weeps for us. We have often been taught that God *judges* us. Or that God is *angry* with us. But have you ever considered that God *weeps* for you and for me and for our world? What difference might that image make to your understanding of God?

Jesus' public lament teaches us something. First, it teaches us something essential about God. Jesus' tears taught his first disciples and us modern disciples sitting here today that we matter deeply to God. God isn't out to get us. God is out to save us. God loves us so much that God is filled with sorrow over us. God weeps for us, as any loving mother might weep for her beloved children. Jesus' tears help us to learn about a God who wants to help us, to guide us in safer pathways, and who grieves when we reject that way and that love. And so Jesus laments.

Jesus' public lament also teaches us the importance of sharing our deepest pain with one another. The value of the public lament is that it can change people. Seeing the tears of others, hearing their cries of sorrow or pain, teaches us, shapes us, changes us. How can we remain the same when we know the deep pain of another? How can we fail to respond when we witness the grief of another?

What makes the lament so powerful is its utter honesty. Laments of sorrow are honest expressions of what we feel, of what is wrong, of what is painful. And so often we tend to live in denial of what pains us, to ignore what isn't right about ourselves or our world, to pretend things are ok when they are not, to gloss over the pain.

Author Michael Card writes in his book about the sacredness of the lament. He notes that in the cases of tragic deaths and sorrows, a lot of Christians "are embarrassed, almost panicky, that there are situations to which they have no answer." He adds, "We want to present Jesus as the answer man, and we don't want Jesus to look bad. And if that's your theology, Jesus can look very bad at funerals."

In contrast, Card remembers a funeral for a six-year old girl killed by a drunk driver. As you might imagine, there was a huge turn-out at the church for the funeral. Card remembers, "It

was so tragic no one even tried to fix it.” He writes that, “The best answer we had was to show up. That's a big part of lamenting as a church together--basically showing up.”

Rarely can we fix the sorrow of another. But we can show up. We can show up and share that pain.

The lament is an honest response of faith to a world that is broken and fallen. The season of Lent is an occasion when we acknowledge that things are not as they should be, we are not as we should be. Brokenness, pain, struggle, injustice, sin, and sorrow make up our lives and our world. And we cry to God for help, not just for ourselves or our loved ones but for the whole world. The Apostle Paul wrote that all creation groans in anticipation of God's redemption and healing. Lent is the time for our groans, our laments, our tears as we seek God's redemption.

Genuine worship offers to God our pain, our struggle, our despair, and our deep anguish over all that is wrong and unjust. In our lament, we hand all that over to God with a plea for healing and for help. And that means that our lament is also rooted in hope. It is a cry to God in the hope that God's love and goodness will ultimately prevail.

Our pastoral prayer today will focus on our sacred lamentations to God. We will have the opportunity to cry to God our questions and distress—as Jesus himself did. Questions like: “why,” and “how long,” and “where are you?” We will cry for our personal brokenness and pain. We will cry for our loved ones who are suffering or struggling. We will cry for the sufferings of strangers. We will cry for our planet. You will be given the opportunity to voice your laments aloud or silently from within your hearts. And together we will raise our lamentations to the God who loves us so much as to weep for us. And from our lamentations we will plant the seeds of Easter hope.