

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
February 26, 2017

## **Love That Never Ends**

Lamentations 3:21-39

There's something important missing from our sanctuary this morning. It's not a piece of furniture or a sacred text. It's not a musical instrument or a piece of high tech equipment. It's not a seasonal decoration or an item for the communion table. No, I'm thinking of something less conspicuous and easily overlooked. Something occasionally placed on one or more of the front pews. I'm talking about a box of tissues.

From time to time we've had tissues in our worship space. It's good to have them within reach for the grieving family during a funeral service. Or they come in handy when someone comes forward to share a tearful testimony during the altar call. Or perhaps someone is so moved by a particular hymn or by a story told in the sermon that they need to dab their moist eyes.

The presence of tissues in the sanctuary says something important about the nature and purpose of congregational worship. It says that when we enter God's presence, we bring with us our sorrows as well as our joys. It says that the pews aren't reserved for those who've attained the blessed life but for those who know the brokenness of life. It says that the church isn't an exclusive assembly of the self-made and the successful but an inclusive gathering of the defeated and the desperate. There is no sign above the sanctuary entrance declaring that only the healthy, the happy, and the whole may enter. None of the ushers will tell you that you need to take your pain, your plight, and your problems, and check them in at the door, then pick them up on your way out.

True, the church is a fellowship of praise and rejoicing because of what God has done for us through Christ. There is an underlying gratitude and gladness to who we are and what we do. But our life together as God's people also includes plenty of room for lament. Lament is a biblical term that refers to how we bring our pain and brokenness to God. Rather than glossing over our sorrow and suffering, we face them honestly and carry them into the presence of God, pouring out our hearts and seeking God's help and deliverance.

There's plenty of lament going on in today's Scripture passage. In fact, our text comes from a portion of the Bible called Lamentations. Lamentations contains the poetic prayers of sufferers who are pleading for God to look, see, and act. They're crying out from the midst of catastrophe. Jerusalem has been destroyed by the Babylonians. A large portion of the population, especially its intellectual and political leadership, has been carried off into exile. Everywhere you look, there's starvation, disease, slaughter, rape, scavenging, and looting. Holy places, and holy things, have been desecrated. People are suffering on a massive scale. A temple full of tissues wouldn't be enough to soak up the tears of God's devastated people.

Author Philip Yancey tells about an address he gave to residents of Newtown, Connecticut, shortly after Christmas 2012, when the community was still reeling from the murder of 20

schoolchildren and six teachers a few days earlier. Yancey recalls an ambulance driver who captured the town's grief and the scale of its sorrow this way:

Everyone experiences grief . . . . Usually, though, you bear grief as if in a bubble. You go to the grocery store. You go back to work. Eventually that outer world takes over more of you, and the grief begins to shrink. Here in Newtown, we go to the store and see memorials to the victims. We walk down the street and see markers on the porches of those who lost a child. It's like a bell jar has been placed over the town, with all the oxygen pumped out. We can't breathe for the grief.<sup>1</sup>

When we encounter God's people in the book of Lamentations, they're suffocating from the sorrow. All their suffering, as well as the devastation, anger, and rage that go with it, get gathered up and brought into the presence of God by the writer in today's passage. At the beginning of chapter three, he says, "He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer" (vv. 4-8). Notice how this individual, who speaks not only for himself but for all the people, feels completely cut off from God. He concludes that because of the people's sin, God has rejected them. And he experiences this rejection in a very deep and personal way: "I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me" (vv. 19-20).

When was the last time you heard someone in the church say, "My soul is downcast within me"? Maybe not in those exact words, but with some terminology that articulates their sorrow and suffering. Maybe during the sharing of prayer concerns and announcements, or during the hymn of invitation. Or maybe less publicly. Perhaps in a small group setting or a one-on-one conversation. I remember one time when I was talking with a gentleman following a worship service. His wife had recently died, and he was taking some of the first steps in his journey of grief. I asked him how he was doing. At first he answered, "Oh I'm doing okay." Then he paused for a moment and said, "Actually, I'm a mess. I never realized how much she did for me."

That gentleman's candor with me was a form of lament. He was acknowledging to me, and in a sense to God, that he was suffering and in pain. It's critical that there be space within the life of the congregation for that kind of honesty about sorrow and affliction. Now it's certainly true, as the Scriptures consistently testify, that the life of God's people includes plenty of praise and gladness. But if our life together is characterized only by affirmations of "I'm so blessed," "God is so good," or "I'm living the victorious life," then we're not fully engaged with reality. The reality portrayed in the Bible is a mixture of praise and lament. Take the book of Psalms as an example. Approximately 40 percent of the Psalms are psalms of lament. So coming into the Lord's presence, individually and corporately, and living our lives in God's presence, includes both tones of celebration and tones of sorrow.

These tones of sorrow can be embodied and expressed in various ways. A funeral service is one example. During the funeral service, we create space that gives us permission to mourn and to feel the sorrow that comes from facing the reality that our loved one is dead. I recall a time when I was helping a family plan a funeral service, and their basic message to me was, "We just want to get this service organized, do the whole grief part/thing, and then move on. After all, we know that our loved one wouldn't want us to be sad/stay sad anyway." I understood their need for comfort and good news in the face of death, but these kinds of things don't come by trying to construct an express route through the grieving

process. There needs to be plenty of time and space for lament, during the funeral and in the days and years that follow.

"My soul is downcast within me." It's okay to feel that way, and to bring that experience to expression, especially in the life of the church. There may be various factors behind your experience of lament. It could be circumstances that were beyond your control. Or events in society or your community that create strife and injustice. Or the behavior of others around you and toward you. Or your own sinful behavior that leads to certain consequences. Whatever has created that sense of brokenness and pain, individually and corporately, it needs to be brought into the presence of God. Sometimes bringing it into the presence of God involves sadness and tears. Sometimes bringing it into the presence of God may involve confession of sins and repentance. Sometimes bringing it into the presence of God involves voicing your protest and asking God if he sees what's happening, crying out for justice.

"My soul is downcast within me." Those are words that need to be woven into your life, and into the life of our congregation. But they're certainly not the only words. The writer of Lamentations follows them by saying, "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (vv. 21-23). So because of God's great faithfulness, there's hope. Not hope that comes by avoiding lament but by entering into it and by being in, and waiting in, that space of sorrow.

Sometimes that's what others need from you. They need you to lament with them. They need you to occupy that place of pain with them, by praying for them, by advocating for them, by listening to them when they want to talk, and by sitting quietly with them when they have no words to speak. On the surface this may look like helplessness and hopelessness, but in fact it's the space where the Lord's compassion can begin to take shape.

Pastor John Claypool had a little daughter who suffered with leukemia. When she went into remission, everybody thought maybe God had healed her. But on an Easter Sunday morning she went into a terrible recurrence. Claypool wrote about how for two weeks his daughter was racked with pain, her eyes swollen shut. She asked him, "Daddy, did you talk to God about my leukemia?" He said, "Yes, dear, we've been praying for you." She said, "Did you ask him how long the leukemia would last? What did God say?" Claypool acknowledged his own sense of powerlessness. What do you say to your daughter when you can't help her, and the heavens are silent? He was emotionally and spiritually exhausted. And a few hours later, she died.

The following Sunday, Claypool preached a powerful sermon on Isaiah 40:31, which says, "But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." As one preacher has put it, Claypool said something to the effect, "There are three stages of life. Sometimes we mount up with wings as an eagle and fly. We're on top of the world. Sometimes we run, and we don't grow weary. We just go through the routine. Sometimes it's all we can do to walk and not faint, and I need your prayers and your encouragement."<sup>2</sup>

In the book of Lamentations, it's all God's people can do just to walk and not faint. And I know that's often the way it is for you. True, sometimes you come to church and you're flying. You're on top of the world. Sometimes you come to church and your running but not growing tired. You're in a good rhythm. But lots of times you come to church and it's

all you can do to walk and not faint. You need time and space for lament, for honesty with God, for pouring out your pain, for getting a glimpse of help and hope.

That doesn't mean there's a quick and easy answer just around the corner. Lament usually isn't just a single moment. It's more of a process. A process where you, like the writer of Lamentations, swing back and forth between signs of hope and periods of despair. By the end of Lamentations, all the loose ends aren't tied up. All the questions aren't answered. All the problems aren't resolved. There's still anxiety about the future. There's still ambiguity about God's next move. There's still uncertainty about when the exile will be over. But through it all, there's a recurring confidence that though the suffering hasn't ended, neither has God's love. Indeed, his love never ends. "His compassions never fail; They are new every morning." Great is his faithfulness.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, "National Tragedy and the Empty Tomb." *Christianity Today* (March 28, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> R. L Russell, "Triumphing Over Trials," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 119.