

Genesis 32:22-31
Psalm 121
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8

Sermon October 20th, 2019

God Listens! God is Just!

When studying in the fields of Psychology and Philosophy I learned that people have struggled with mental health challenges for thousands of years. Yet, it is safe to say that only within the last decade or two have we started to create safe spaces where people can come and share their stories of their mental health challenges with others. Where people can openly lament without feeling shame. Where people can stop pretending to be happy all the time. Where people can embrace their faith even as they suffer.

This is important, because we live in a society where we are taught that to be prosperous is to be normal. When the settlers came over from Europe they were promised prosperity. Land, money, opportunity. The indigenous people were promised that the government would take care of them. Would make them prosperous if they signed these treaties. When immigrants come to our country today they are granted this same promise of prosperity. We who grew up in this country have come to believe that it is our right as a Canadian to be prosperous. And yet, so many people living in our country do not live in prosperity.

Even within our faith communities there are leaders who have used parts of the Bible to teach theologies that tell people that if they believe in God. If they just follow the Commandments. They will be prosperous.

This prosperity that is often measured in how much money and property/possessions we have. This prosperity that is supposed to lead to happiness and satisfaction with life.

One of the issues I have with this promise of prosperity we come across in our society, and in our churches, is that when we face suffering and injustice we go through a kind of identity crisis. We think to ourselves, "we are supposed to be prosperous. Bad things shouldn't happen to us." Or if we have the wealth and the possessions, but find ourselves struggling with depression we start to think "I am prosperous. Why am I not satisfied? Why can't I be happy?" We end up repressing our negative feelings, because getting discouraged or frustrated means we are not faithful enough. Or if we reflect the sadness we feel people will think we are not normal enough. So, when people ask us how we are doing we force out an okay or a fine. When in reality, we are profoundly struggling inside. Or when we decide to share our feelings people either pity us or they don't want us to drag them down.

The followers of Jesus. The early church struggled too with this idea that to be prosperous is to be normal. Roman societies often measured people based on their wealth and status. If you were prosperous you were in the in club, if not you were marginalized. Within their religious community people saw prosperity as a measure of God's favor. So, leaders taught the people that prosperity was within reach. All you needed to do was follow the commandments.

Well, a lot of the early believer's faced persecution and lost their wealth and status for believing in Jesus' movement. When it came time to following the Mosaic laws they were redefining what this meant as Gentiles became accepted into the community. When Luke shares this story, he is sharing it with a church that is getting discouraged as they try and wait patiently for Jesus to come again to make everything right. They have been suffering for a long while now. Is God even listening anymore?

In my struggles with depression. In my experience of other people's struggle with depression and other mental health challenges there are a lot of days where we suffer. Sometimes it feels like God has abandoned us. When we get the courage, and reach out to others we face a lot of stigma, which magnifies these feelings of abandonment. Is God even listening anymore? Are our neighbors listening?

Our faith leaders/mentors often do a really good job of teaching us to praise God. To give thanks. To hope in the goodness, we will receive. To support the ministries of the church, because they are making a real difference in people's lives. Helping them reach these goals of prosperity.

We don't always do a good job, teaching others how to lament. Or that lament is actually a healthy expression of our spirituality. When in fact, lament is all over the bible. Over half the psalms are about lament including today's. If you have never experienced depression read Psalm 88. This gives a pretty accurate description of what someone with depression may be feeling. This psalm is written by a community that has faced grave injustice, and are devastated. So, they lament. The book of Job is a story about someone's experience of injustice, and their inevitable lament. There is even a book called lamentations that talks about the Israelite's experience of exile and their lament. There are many examples of lament in the bible including the story we hear in our gospel this morning.

Lament is a part of us as much as happiness is a part of us. When people are free to openly express their lament, it can lead to healing and new life. When people are unable to express their lament, it can lead to painful wounds that linger, preventing them from experiencing new life.

When I look at our own history, and see what our indigenous neighbors faced in the residential schools. Generation after generation not being allowed to share their stories

of lament with anyone. Being told to put on a face. Being threatened if they dare share anything. Left with wounds that lingered. Keeping them from experiencing healing and renewal. Themes I kept hearing over and over again at the national event in Saskatoon.

And then seeing their liberation as they finally could share their stories of lament with us. Watching their body posture and their words becoming freer. More relaxed. No longer having to hold onto this pain. Finally, experiencing healing and hope that they will be renewed. Reconnecting with their spirituality and traditions. Lament is so important for our well-being. It helps us release our painful feelings, and opens us up to experiencing healing and renewal.

How sad I am when people continue to ignore their pain and tell them to just get over it already or even worse blame them for it. Unfortunately, I have heard these comments a lot. These comments that reflect how steeped we are in this view that we live in a prosperous society where everyone is supposed to be prosperous. When we find out a group of people or a person is not living this way we either ignore them or blame and shame them, because it is easier than going through the identity crisis we experience when coming to the realization that not everyone is prosperous. Even people who we perceive as hard working.

In response to the early believer's struggles, Jesus encourages them to lament. Jesus encourages them to be honest about how they are feeling. Jesus uses a parable about a widow who has faced an injustice and is pleading with this unjust judge to be just. Of course, the widow has everything going against her. No status. No money. No power. She is a woman. And this judge is not one with faith or love for people. Yet, after lamenting day after day this judge grants her justice. She is freed from her pain. She experiences healing and new life.

Now if someone within our not so perfect justice system can sometimes reflect justice in someone's life then imagine what God can do. Jesus says to us.

So, when we face injustice in our lives whether it is some form of oppression or a mental health challenge or something else, Jesus encourages us to keep lamenting. Keep praying. God is listening, and even though justice doesn't always occur on our watch. God is just.

Keep praying. Not only for that day that God will make everything right, but also to help us live with our suffering knowing that this is part of who we are as human beings living in a broken world. Feeling liberated to lament. Hoping through our lament that God and our neighbor are listening and walking with us. Being honest with ourselves, with others, and with God. Deepening our spirituality. Deepening our relationships. Learning patience along the way.

As I was looking at a commentary on Luke by Fred B. Craddock he quotes an unknown African American preacher who said when facing persecution, “until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is”.

And so, whatever injustice you face in your life, God invites you to lament. To share all of who you are with the one who created you. To believe that even in the silence God is listening. To strive not for material prosperity, but for the kingdom of God.

Let us pray, comforting God, sometimes life is hard. Sometimes the injustices we face wound us. Empower us to open ourselves up to you and to others. To lament. To have faith in your promise of justice, redemption, and healing. **Amen.**

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