

## Sermon TUMC – Eternity Sunday 2015

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Scripture passages: Psalm 42, Matthew 5:4 & 11:28-30

*A morte e a vida não são contrárias. São irmãs.  
A reverencia pela vida exige que sejamos sábios  
para permitir que a morte chegue quando a vida deseja ir.  
---Rubem Alves*

(translation: Death and life are not opposites. They are sisters.  
Reverence for life demands that we be wise  
In allowing death to arrive when life wishes to go.)

This week here at TUMC we had a funeral service for our dear Ellie Voth. Ellie who lived a good long life, and made me realize that I have a long way to go and a lot to change before my children might speak so well of me!

Death is devastating and it is inconvenient, even when it might be expected; and it always amazes me – and on the other hand it doesn't – how so many of us come together and make a funeral happen on short notice. As a church, we are ready and willing to make it a community event and “mourn with those who mourn.” It was beautiful to see, a true witness to God's kingdom ways.

The funeral reminded me of a conversation I had a couple of weeks ago with Aya as we rode back together from the Harvest Festival at Lori and Dora's. We talked about how different cultures mourn differently. In Aya's culture, and in others around the world (including in Biblical times), the custom is that those who lose a loved one will make their pain outwardly visible by wailing and crying loudly; to signal that you are in grief. The wisdom of that is that nothing gets held back. You just put all your pain out there, all the rage and all the depth of what you feel and you just cry out into the universe, right there for everyone to see.

In Canadian culture we tend to surround ourselves with sniffles, and Kleenex boxes. I know that any wailing I've ever done over the loss of a loved one, I've done in my room, as I try to hold it back and can't quite manage. We never really “lose it” in our grief. Aya has a theory that this might be why the loss of grief seems to last for so long in our culture. We carry it around for so long because we never really manage to release it.

Today I want to make a case for wailing and lament, either for real or as a figure of speech. Because wailing and lament are the actions that lead us to hope.

Think about it, what is the effect of crying out loud when you suffer pain? Ouch? It draws a response from those around you: Are you alright? It's an instant reaction to garner support and care in your pain.

I think that the one good thing is that wailing, be it out loud at a funeral or in our facebook posts about the state of the world, brings a community of support around us. This is also why we have sharing time here at TUMC. Theologian Gayle Gerber Koontz notes that “when we are vulnerable within the community of the Spirit, we permit God to work in healing ways.”<sup>1</sup> It’s part of what God wants, it’s part of how the Kingdom of God is set up, that when you cry out Ouch! Others come around to help take care of that pain.

That is what our scripture reading is telling us: “Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4) The

Beatitudes are all about how things work in the Kingdom of God – that illusive realm that Jesus was always talking about. He’d say that we need eyes to see it and ears to hear it, a sixth sense to recognize it.

Sometimes we tend to think that the kingdom of God is something that will only happen in the future or in an imagined utopia of some sort. But Jesus himself said that the kingdom is now, it’s here. I believe that as well, not “not in some heaven light years away” as the hymn says, or in a distant after life. Though I do hold on to a belief that this mortal life is not all that there is to it. But I think that when we come around each other to console each other we are experiencing the Kingdom of God, because those who mourn are being comforted.

Some people I know refer to it as God’s kin-dom (as in people who are God’s kin). Instead of it being a hierarchical image, it’s a relational image. It’s appealing to me to think of it this way, because I believe that is where Christ’s body does happen: in our relationships with each other, in our consolations with each other and in our rituals of funerals and Eternity Sunday.

At funerals in our sadness and loss we are also faced with our own mortality, and getting a reality check of what really matters in life, and where our values are headed – which is also the work of the realm of God. At funerals we reaffirm that it is God who holds the universe and who has given us our very lives. We are tuning our eyes and ears to see the world as God does.

The power of lamenting, by allowing for the wailing of sorrow is that it elicits compassion and perspective and allows us to answer “Where and how is God in all this?” The question then is, why do we lament so little if it’s that healing and that powerful? Or why do we lament individually and secretly, when as you just saw, we just took part in a powerful communal experience?

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<sup>1</sup> “After a Death: Theology and Christian Practices” by Gayle Gerber Koontz, *Vision, End of Life*, Spring 2004.

Which brings me to another text we have today, Psalm 42, a song of lament. If you go to the psalms most are a lament. It's a lost art. The definition of a biblical lament, "is an honest cry to a God who is powerful, good, and just—a cry that this situation is not in alignment with God's person or purposes. It's a cry that **expects an answer from God**, and therefore results in hope, trust, and joy rather than despair."<sup>2</sup>

Most laments start by stating the problem, and then affirming trust in God. The sadness that we feel when we lament leads to remembering—very much like at a funeral. We are sad for the loss and we start to remember all the positive reasons why that loss feels so intense. And in remembering those we remember what God has done, and we put our trust in God again. That's how the lament does its work. In the sadness and remembering it lead to a reaffirmation of hope in God.

I chose the Matthew 11 text on Eternity because it is often a text of consolation, Jesus saying:

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

I went and looked at the context of this quote in Matthew. I had never noticed this before, but these verses come right after Jesus has had a big long rant and wail about how the towns of his home contry don't have their eyes open to the work of God.

He rants agains Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum and says, "You've seen so many signs and you're still blind. If I had gone to our enemies with the signs you've seen they would have repented by now and you still don't repent!" Jesus' words sounded a lot like a lament to me. And so this verse took on a whole new meaning.

These last couple of weeks all I've wanted to do is lament about the state of the world. The terrorism, the war mongering, the xenophobia and racism we see splattered on the news. Here I was surprised to learn that Jesus also got frustrated with the state of the world. Jesus also needed to utter a cry that his situation was not in alignment with God's purposes. It was a perfectly reasonable response.

And only then, after being sad and angry, does Jesus offer the perspective of hope: learn from me, find rest for your souls, learn from me.

How *do* we renew our hope in God in the middle of despair? Sometimes it is by going through the steps of wailing and crying and lamenting. This is how we name, we suffer through and eventually decrease our pain. This is how we call on the

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<sup>2</sup> There are so many psalms of lament that they can be broken into subcategories: individual lament, corporate lament, psalms of confession, illness, political complaint, and the like. (<http://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2010/my-god-my-god-why>)

support of the community, it is how we gain perspective, remember what God, the author of life and peace, has done and is doing and will do in God's kingdom.

I'd like to end with a poem that I found this week by Steve Garnaas-Holmes that sums up what I'm trying to say.

Feeling sad for the world

Every now and then  
we leave off our pious yearnings,  
and even our righteous ire,  
and sit down to the hard work  
of being sad for the world.

It takes guts, God knows—  
not anger but sorrow;  
it tires prophets and psalmists alike.  
The wolf that cries in the long valley,  
the sea that chants its lament  
over and over with sighs and tears,  
the hermit on sore knees,  
the angels at their posts  
taking turns offering up their  
aching hearts,  
even Christ weeping,  
they can't do it alone.

In the end it is  
the broken hearted  
in whom we find  
the deepest companionship.  
We come away wet with grief  
yet oddly strengthened  
with the fibers of hope.  
In grief for the world we touch its worth.  
In sorrow we find each other,  
and there, the substance of joy.

Weird, isn't it, how that alone  
is the healing balm we ask?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light* [www.unfoldinglight.net](http://www.unfoldinglight.net)