

Again. And Again. And Again.

Text: Psalm 42; Romans 8: 31, 35, 37-39

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June 19, 2016

I didn't anticipate writing a sermon like this for Father's Day. No, far from it, I had imagined a title something like "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" which you may have seen posted in the Hartford Courant yesterday. But it hasn't been such a beautiful week as terror in Orlando stunned and captivated us all, and the world, too.

So instead I'm going to start with the raw inside of my heart . . .

*It keeps happening.
Again. And again. And again.*

*Terror. Violence. Trauma.
Pain erupting with numbing precision:*

*San Bernardino, Charleston, Virginia Tech,
Aurora, Sandy Hook, Orlando.*

*Lives stolen in cold-blooded hatred,
as an assault rifle shattered everything.*

*This time, 50 souls, though some say 49,
families and hopes and futures gone.*

*The heinous suddenness
lingers for all of us everyday,*

*not knowing just where or when,
every breath, only borrowed.*

*Is there any word to redeem us,
any place that is safe, or are there only tears?*

*O God: Hear us. Hold us. Heal us. Hope us.
Again. And again. And again.*

O God, hear us. Honestly, we've got to start with that prayerful cry because some things are so awful that we have to shout out, push back, say "enough," shake in disbelief; times when loss and violence are so overwhelming that they can't be ignored or held within. Anymore. Not. Any. More.

Someone needs to say something, don't you know? Not just a silent prayer of even sincere reverent memorial this time. We need more. But talking is hard. Still someone

needs to hear, right? Someone needs to listen. But who can speak for us? And what needs to be said? And where do we turn? And when does the madness stop?

There's a pattern of prayer in the book of Psalms called lament. Nearly one third of the 150 Psalms are of this sort.¹ I lived in and with those words this week. To lament, truly lament, is not for the tame of heart. It's to raise the fist of the soul and, according to Wikipedia, "wail, to bemoan, to express sorrow or grief, to mourn deeply, to regret profoundly."

I warn you: Laments are not soft or pious prayers. They are not containable. They are painstakingly real. "From the depths I cry to you, O God." "How long, O Lord? How long?" "Hear my case; consider and answer me." "Why have you forsaken me?" "My soul cries for you." Or, more pointed, "Why do you stand so far off? Why do you hide yourself? Why have you forgotten me?" "Tears are my food all day and all night."

We all need to get to that kind of ground these present days. We need to dare the scream: Dear God, hear us! And though that won't stop the anguish, or reverse the tragedy, this is just one of those times where lament is the only honest start.

But it only begins there. Because a true lament doesn't just give us permission to vent and rattle off an angry opinion. Lament isn't merely a spiritually-correct-and-acceptable way to complain or whine. No, far deeper, lament at its truest raises consciousness to human atrocity and injustice. It wrestles us beneath the surface.

Laments shout and scream to God about what is really broken in us and in our world. Depending on the circumstances, some of these are profoundly personal and others are broadly communal.² But they are not ever lukewarm. Some are about contemporary matters of the day, like the shattering events of this week; and others are more concerned with the spiritual abyss of loneliness or despair. But whatever the focus, Psalms of lament expose the raw nerves such that they cannot be ignored any longer.

Monday morning my friends in the West Hartford Clergy Group gathered here at our church. We all needed to talk. We needed to reel at what happened in Orlando, at that point, still unfolding. We needed to stand in solidarity with one another in the face of abject hatred. We needed the strength of each other because none of us was strong enough alone. We needed a safe space to talk about the frightful complexity of these times in which we live: the increasing frequency of hate crimes; this horrific attack on the GLBTQ community in a place that felt safe; Islam-o-phobia and instant rushes to judgment; access to assault weapons; what it means to be open and affirming; how silence has become an unintended nod of complicity. Frank. Raw. Seething. Heartfelt. Honest to God conversation. That's what led us to organize a Vigil for the whole West Hartford community on Wednesday.

This is the blood and guts of lament. Dear God, hear us! Please! Listen to us! Now! Hold us in our anguish! Here! Lead us toward change!

And then this: **Dear God, hope us.** Notice the unruly shift in my language here. I'm using literary license to suggest hope can be a verb as much as a noun.

This is absolutely consistent with laments. First, we scream out for God to hear us. Then we struggle life's horrible moments through in the sacred holding of that relationship. Finally, we pray that God will hope us, that is to infuse and vest and empower us with hope that leads us to act, and the will to see beyond to a better day and a better way.

It is so tempting sometimes to stop short of hope. You know this. So do I. Sometimes it's easier to get stuck in powerlessness and despair. Sometimes paralysis overwhelms and inertia sets in. Sometimes we prefer wallowing to wellness. Sometimes we even prefer inaction and complicity so as not to rock any of the boats in our collective harbor.

But look carefully and remember: all but a very few of the laments in the Psalms ultimately turn toward hope. They ride through pretty ugly, frank and straight anguish and then turn toward hope. They turn toward life. They turn toward trust. They turn toward God.

Fred Rogers was a minister of the Gospel without using that word. He shared this memory about hope in dark places. "When I was a boy," he wrote, "and I would see scary and horrible things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. That's where there is hope.' The helpers are the ones who get up and do something to make things better. 'Even in horrible circumstances, you will always find people who are helping'." ³

Dear God, hope us. Grammar aside, proper English be-gone, it makes all the sense in the world.

So please, apropos for this week of sadness. Let's practice the power of lament, so that we might heal, and that our healing will lead to hope, and our hope will empower a new tomorrow.

Still, we end where we began, with lament. And the Psalmist leads us right. Only by naming the raw and broken places, even weeping the words, do we find the way to hope. As I share mine again I encourage you to go home and write your own.

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¹ Donald Griggs. *Passion, Promise and Praise*. Kerygma Publications, 1993, p. 67.

² Leander Keck, ed. *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IV*. Abington Press, 1996, p. 644 – 648.

³ Fred Rogers. *The World According to Fred Rogers*. Hyperion, 2003, pp. 187.