LEARNING LAMENT SESSION 4: THE SACRAMENT OF GODLY TEARS

Introduction

Last week we got into the book of Psalms and got very practically into what composes a Lament, that it is has an address to God, a complaint, a request, a push for God to act and then ends in confidence that God will provide. Last session, by the way, was a very Modern, Western way of thinking about Lament; we were very practical, scholastic and analytic, "these are the 5 steps in Lament, of bringing your pain before others and God." This week we are going to move more to the East in our thinking. We will start with what Jesus taught about lament (who was of course an ancient Easterner as well as God), and then trace an amazing way of incorporating Lament into daily life which took root in the Eastern churches including our own Armenian Church. You see, our church fathers and mother were very attuned to seeing God in all things, not just in church or formal prayer, but in nature and life, in the darker emotions as much as the lighter ones. And what they believed is that whenever the spiritually attuned person shed tears, heartfelt tears, they could discern the closeness of God and his special grace to guide us in our pilgrimage through this life.

But before we get into the teaching of Godly tears, which study on in my graduate work and I am excited to share with you, let's review what we have discussed thusfar in our study on Lament; of how to go through our pain together, before God.

Our Culture of Denial-Can't Deal With Pain

In our study thus far, we said that we live in a culture which is very optimistic, success-oriented, consumer driven and image conscious. Not all of this is bad, but together it makes for a tough cocktail. These forces conspire to make us believe that if you are living the good life, you will only have positive experiences, and that everything is to have a happy face. If you don't have a happy face, it's probably because you are doing something wrong. So you learn to close your eyes and heart to any sickness or death around you, any depression, struggle, betrayal. This of course comes at a cost. At best we are ignoring half of life, stunted in our ability to live and feel a whole life. At its worst, I think it has helped create a society which refuses to acknowledge and deal with pain. A society which, in the course of my lifetime, has seen an exponential increase in addictions, pain killer use, anti-depressants, mental health problems, mass shooters, suicides and a host of other problems. If you deny pain, it doesn't go away, it seems to fester, or as we put it in session one "If you don't transform your pain, you transmit it."

So there seems to be a connection between a society which denies pain, with an increased inability to deal with pain in healthy ways. I also think there is an obvious connection with this reduced ability to deal with pain, and the fact that church going and Biblical literacy have exponentially declined in this same time period. Church has always been the main support for people to help each other deal with loss and struggle, and to learn to find God through their pain. But as we know less and less people find a need for God and church in their self-made lives, and many churches have submitted to the temptation to follow the culture instead of leading it, its easier and perhaps more profitable to make people feel good and send them home. But if you want a crystal clear image of how our church's main function is supposed to be helping people find meaning through pain, bring to mind, Jesus, the founder of our church. How is he most often depicted, What is his logo (Look especially to the Catholic Church)? The founder and main symbol of our church, is a man wracked in pain, dying on a cross whom we worship as the embodiment of love; how extraordinary! Our faith, is all about how to live a good, beautiful and true life by journeying faithfully through pain.

What Would Jesus Do With Pain? Lament

Ok, so let's stick with the founder of our faith and Lord Jesus Christ to enter into today's session. Remember how I said that if you want to know what the Catholic Church believes about something you can look into your catechism, what the Protestant church you can consult your Bible and what the Armenian Church believes you pick up your Badarak book?

Well now we are going to do the efficient and practical American way to find out what we believe about lament, by asking the What would Jesus do? How Would Jesus Deal With pain and suffering? How Did Jesus Deal With pain and suffering?

Sure, he prayed. But did prayer spare him his pain and suffering? No and more on that in a minute. But the most basic, seemingly too simple answer to how Jesus dealt with pain and suffering is that he embraced it, he felt it. He wept. "Jesus Wept." We looked briefly in our first session about how this most simple sentence in the Bible, is far from simple. Jesus was God and yet Jesus cried when his friend Lazarus died. He wasn't surprised by his friend's death, he knew he would bring him back to life, and yet he cried for him. We trust that he wasn't faking it, so this must mean that crying, lamenting is a necessary part of being fully human, of being close to God.

Jesus cried out, lamented in despair from the cross. Jesus knew that death would not be his ultimate end, he told his disciples he was going to die and be resurrected dozens of times. Yet he cried a Lament from the cross. Does anyone recall that most poignant phrase that Jesus cried form the cross? "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?" Where is that from? Psalm 22, a psalm of Lament, like we prayed and studied last week. Why is it significant that Jesus cried a Psalm of Lament from the cross? Why didn't he just say "Father, I am hurting so terribly," or something like that? Because Jesus was teaching that even God laments. Because Jesus is every man and woman. Because Jesus is just like the regular ancient Hebrew guy who suffered in his life and at times felt abandoned by God and prayed Psalm 22 for deliverance. He is just like me and you who suffer in this life and at times feels abandoned by God and pray Psalm 22 for deliverance. Pain and suffering tears apart and isolates, singing a Psalm of Lament keeps Jesus connected, even through agony, with all those who have suffered before and after him.

What Did Jesus Teach About Pain? Whatever is Broken is Blessed

So Jesus dealt with pain and suffering, by weeping, lamenting. And as with all things pertaining to Jesus, he taught most profoundly by his own example. But Jesus did also have a teaching for us about tears and lament, a teaching made all the more powerful because it is backed up by his example. Does anyone know Jesus' simple and profound teaching to us about lament and tears, (or mourning as most translations use)? "Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted." In his greatest captured teaching, and arguably the greatest teaching of all of mankind, the beatitudes, Jesus turns conventional wisdom on its head by saying not only should you not avoid crying, but you are blessed if you do.

What do you think this means in our practical lives 'blessed are those who mourn'? Are we supposed to seek out opportunities for tears and pain because it is a blessing? Are we supposed to not worry about inflicting tears and pain on others because they are blessed by it? Does God enjoy our suffering? No, no and no. Jesus is repeating the tough love that is a crucial part of this life onto the next, that whatever is broken, can be blessed. That comfort and joy are possible in this life and the next, but that mourning and lament are the gateway. No tears, no joy. No cross, no Easter. No death, no Resurrection.

Why is it like this? I don't know. But as we said, why is often an unsatisfying question for mortals to ask about the mysteries of God and life, including pain and suffering. And guess what, the Eastern Church, our church, was much less interested in asking rational questions of why than the Western church. Because rather than wrap our heads around faith and suffering, the Eastern church was much more interested in weaving our lives around it, in seeing how lament and tears are "baked in" to all life and creation, and that the more fully we mourn our losses, paradoxically, the more fully we experience our gains. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted."

Eastern Understanding of Tears As a Natural Sacrament

Our church, along with the other eastern churches, took Jesus' example and teaching about mourning so seriously, that they began to see tears as something of a natural sacrament. What do I mean by sacrament? We had a whole series on this, and we could say this in a hundred ways, but most basically a sacrament is something which visibly happens in the world or in our lives which mirrors an invisible grace of God, the movement of the Holy Spirit. I say natural sacrament to distinguish them from the church sacraments which we believe Christ gave us, baptism, communion, etc. Because our

forefathers thought that all of creation was God's first church, sanctuary, and that many things in nature and our bodies reflected his grace. And our church fathers and mother believed that God was especially present and working on us, whenever we experienced heartfelt tears. Isn't that amazing and beautiful?

Modern Western Understanding of Tears As Breakdown

On the surface it isn't though, because again, we live in a society which has trouble processing these darker emotions and would have us avoid them as much as possible. Think about this, when was the last time that you cried in a public place? For me, it was...when was our last parish council meeting☺? But seriously, most all of us would be mortified to cry in front of others. Many of us men can't even remember or admit the last time we cried privately? Why is that? Tears are the same substance as sweat, yet it doesn't make anyone mortified and severely uncomfortable if we sweat in public. Well of course, because tears show you are vulnerable...and we are afraid of that, so we hide them in public and stuff them down in private too.

Well, you could argue that at the grocery store, or work or the library you shouldn't cry because there is a time and place for everything. But I can't tell you how many times people have apologized to me or others for shedding a very appropriate amount of tears at very appropriate times, like in the hospital or even at a funeral; "Sorry, Father, for my little break down." Does that not point to something wrong with a culture which makes us apologize and deny our pain at a funeral? And Look at the words we use for tears, "break down," "losing it" and "melt down." These words reveal that in our culture, tears are a dangerous disruption in a person's self-control and ability to function; a "breakdown" that one must try to avoid at all costs. Also notice the machine language here, "breakdown." We aren't machines though, that are made to do one thing over and over same way every day. We are human beings, we have seasons, we are made to do any number of extraordinary things, and often times our 'breakdowns' are necessary for our big "breakthroughs." Bring to mind the last time you shed heart-felt tears about something, and when you have time in quiet and prayer think about what also came out of these tears besides pain. Most of the time, if we have eyes to see it, we can see that a blessing also came from it. A deep growth, an advance in our ability to love and be loved.

Seeing God Through Our Tears (Refer to Handout Seeing God Through Our Tears)

The Eastern mystics understood this. They were not bothered by the fact that often tears pointed to very powerful negative emotions and realities or that somehow lament and tears were something that made you less of a man or woman. Rather than depleting the weeper and the well of human experience, tears actually help fill human experience and fulfill us in closer relationship to God.

So to help you and I be more mindful and intentional about seeing our tears not as breakdowns, but breakthrough, I have selected 7 of the most succinct quotes from the Armenian and Eastern churches which illustrate this way of experiencing tears and lament, which paradoxically, leads to great fullness and joy.

SEEING GOD THROUGH OUR TEARS

TEARS NURTURE SPIRITUAL GROWTH

What rain is for seeds, tears are for those who are afflicted. –St. John Chrysostom

LENT IS THE SEASON OF TEARS & SPIRITUAL GROWTH

[on why Lent takes place during Spring] The tenth reason is that (Spring) is the season of crying and tears, because the pruned vineyards weep in this season. It is also the time for our tears, because when we repent, our tears of compunction should fall like a weeping vineyard; as David says "All night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears (Ps 6:6). -Grigor Tatevatsi

TEARS 'MOVE' GOD

Furthermore, tears compel God in His mercy; It is like a mother who has many sons. One son simply goes and gets food from her basket. One son can speak and simply asks his mother for food. The other is a baby, who can't speak and can only cry; but his mother is moved by his tears and provides something to eat.

In this same way, the angels, as perfect sons of God, go to Him directly for sustenance. The saints speak to God in prayer and receive from Him. But as for us, we have neither legs nor speech, we are unformed and unaware. With tears alone can we beg for God's mercy; He, of course, is merciful and provides. -Grigor Tatevatsi

3 KINDS OF GODLY TEARS

It is known that there are three types of spiritual tears, the first for our sins which is repentance, the second for a friend which is mercy and virtue, and the third for the kingdom which is blessedness. -Grigor Tatevatsi

TEARS FOR SINS

The tears that come after baptism are greater than baptism itself, though it may seem rash to say so. Baptism washes off those evils that were previously within us, whereas the sins committed after baptism are washed away by tears. The baptism received by us as children we have all defiled, but we cleanse it anew with our tears. If God in His love for the human race had not given us tears, those being saved would be few indeed and hard to find. -John Climacus

TEARS FOR A FRIEND

Medicinal plants and roots heal the pains of the body and penitential streams of tears heal the wounds of sin on the soul, particularly those who repent with charity and compassion to those in need. - Hovhan Mandakuni

TEARS FOR THE KINGDOM

Furthermore, the wise say that the distance to travel between heaven and earth is great while the distance for tears to travel from the eyes, down the face is short. Yet this short journey of tears, conquers the great distance to heaven. -Grigor Tatevatsi