LEARNING LAMENT SESSION 1:
IF WE CANNOT TRANSFORM OUR PAIN, WE WILL TRANSMIT IT

Introduction

"Learning Lament" Has PR Problem

Our sermon series is called Learning Lament, and I will admit to you right off the bat that I realize the title has a PR problem. People either don't know what Lament is, or they have negative associations with it. When I told the altar servers that the Lenten series was Learning Lament, their blank stares confirmed that Lament is not a word we use any more. When I shared with my brother clergy that I'd be doing a Lenten series on Lament, there were lots of jokes; "well at least you won't have to print many handouts" and "can my parishioners come.... they will appreciate me so much more.". The grain of truth behind these jokes, was the fear that no one will come to a Sermons Series called Learning Lament. Thank you for proving them wrong.

Well actually, a few of the clergy had come around by the end of our retreat, one even asking to use my notes when done. Al this to say, that if you came to this sermons series with some trepidation, or would rather a different topic, you are in good company. But perhaps if we give it a chance, God willing, we will begin to see why this sermons series may be one of the most important we do-and not just theoretically but for you personally. Today will just be an extended introduction to the topic, a little shorter so we can get started with our assembly on time. In future weeks we will look at the art of Lament in the Bible, Armenian Church tradition and how it might help today.

Toward a Definition

Well since we don't often use the word Lament in conversation, and because there may be misconceptions of what it is, let's try to come up with a working definition of Lament before I tell you why it is worthwhile to discuss it for five sessions. **LET'S START WITH YOUR ASSOCIATIONS OF LAMENT. WHAT IS LAMENT? WHAT DOES LAMENT BRING TO MIND?**

Most everyone associates lament with grief, loss, pain, heartache, profound and prolonged sadness, weeping, feeling sorry. This is only partially true, but let's pretend it is totally true. The fact that lament is associated with grief, loss, pain, heartache, profound and prolonged sadness, weeping, feeling sorry, explains why we would rather discuss a different topic. We all would rather these things don't exist. But we aren't children. **WHAT DOES A CHILD DO WHEN THEY SEE SOMETHING SCARY?** They put their hands over their eyes, hoping whatever they are seeing will go away. But of course for all of us adults, loss, pain, heartache, don't go away by closing our eyes to them, they are a part of life, and surely life becomes inauthentic, warped and stunted if we don't know how to live through all of its experiences including the painful ones...more on that in a moment.

But toward our definition of lament, calling lament sadness is only a half- truth, like calling prayer talking. Yes it's true, lament does often contain sadness, and prayer is often done by talking, but of

course what is missing is that prayer isn't talking to yourself, it's talking to God. And what's missing is that lament isn't just feeling sad for yourself, it is acknowledging and expressing sadness, but with an abiding trust in God. So let this then be our working definition of lament: Lament is a language, a skill, an art-where together we learn to deal with our loss, pain and sorrow with a deep faith in God.

This Seems Simple...But Really Is Profound

Now why do we need to 'learn lament' as this study call us to do, it seems too simple to learn. As with all profound things, it is simple on the surface, but profoundly rich and deep. **DOES ANYONE KNOW WHAT THE SHORTEST SENTENCE IS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT? "**Jesus Wept." This is the simplest sentence in the Bible, but it is not at all simple. Think about this a little bit, what are the consequences of our understanding of God and ourselves from these two words, "Jesus wept?" **FIRST, THOUGH, CAN ANYONE TELL ME THE TWO TIMES WHERE IT IS WRITTEN WHERE JESUS CRIED?** Lazarus (John 11) and Jerusalem (Luke 19). Let's start with Lazarus (tell story) Did he not see Lazarus' death coming? Of course he did, Jesus is God. Did he lose hope that Lazarus was dead and lost? No, he brought him to life right after he cried. Was he putting on a show? No God doesn't lie. So if Jesus wasn't surprised by his friend's death, he knew it wasn't the end, and he wasn't making a show, why would the Son of God cry? We will speak more about the other times Jesus wept, lamented over Jerusalem, on the cross, later. For now, it's just important to note that Jesus wept, lamented, yet at the same time, was full of hope, faith and love; loving even his enemies until the very end, hanging on the cross.

Why Is Learning Lament Important For Us?

Ok, so it was important for Jesus to 'learn' to Lament, but we're not Jesus, why is it important for us? For many of you who have gone through, or are going through tough times, deep down you know why it is important. But for many others, you can credibly say to yourself; "my life is pretty good, I don't feel particularly sad, sure I have my struggles, but five sessions on Lament, isn't that pessimistic, overly sad? Why can't we go to the nearest mega church, or Joel Osteen and feel good about ourselves?"

Well, for this introduction, let me just give three good reasons why our study on lament is so important for you, and why my study on lament needed to put this all together, has been so important for me. We will finish off today with this, so that, again, we can try and start our parish assembly as early as possible.

Reasons Learning Lament is Important

1) The first reason has to do with honesty and authenticity. Healthy life, healthy spirituality is always honest about our experiences, and much of our experiences are painful. God knows this, God sees through any masks we wear. The people who love us know this. The first problem that occurs when we ignore pain , by denying or withdrawing from it, is that we ignore a whole facet of what it is to be human. We have a group of people in this church and every church, and I don't judge them because we all have this in us, who show up in this church on Christmas and Easter, the happy days. They skip the penitent reflection of Advent and Lent, the season of the cross and the week of the cross, Holy Week. They come for the bright celebrations. But here is the sad part. When we show up for just the celebrations of live, the good times, on Chistmas and Easter, but skip all the hard stuff in between, we

might find that we only show up for the positive aspects of life and try to skip all of the real, harder stuff in between. This makes for half a life, not a full one. I have seen this in marriages. Couples are fully present to each other for the engagement and first few years of marriage, but when life gets real, they can't deal with it. We all have some of this in us. I have seen families who visit and communicate with elder loved ones, but when they become seriously ill or die, the younger ones detach form them or deny anything wrong, because they've never learned to deal with the long and protected pain or sickness unto death. We all have some of this in us. Lament helps us deal with the entire spectrum of our experiences, it helps us live a full life, with its ups and downs, with its joys and sorrows. Because something I think we will see as we go along, is that you can't really experience deeps joys, unless you can also experience deep sorrows.

2) The second reason to learn to lament is not only that it helps us deal with our own pain and find joy for ourselves, but it helps us from unnecessarily inflicting pain on the ones we love. Because a principal that runs through theology and psychotherapy and all the helping professions, is that "If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it (Richard Rohr)" That is, if we don't deal with pain, if we stuff it down, deny or withdraw from it, it will fester within and come out in many worse ways. It comes out in addictions-which not coincidentally by the way-are all addictions to trying to kill pain. All addicts are addicted to pain killers, whether alcohol, pills, over-eating or promiscuity. Why? Because addicts-and we all have some of this in us- never learned well how to alleviate pain with the help of God and loved ones. So they self-medicate. So thankfully, most of us don't suffer from substance addiction, but that doesn't mean we don't make things worse for all around us when we stuff down loss or pain. For most of us it just comes out disguised as different emotions; like anger. **CAN YOU BRING TO MIND THE LAST TIME YOU WERE REALLY ANGRY AT SOMETHING OR SOMEBODY, BLOOD PRESSURE RISING, CAN'T GET IT OUT OF YOUR BODY FOR A DAY ANGRY?** Well sometimes that is simply anger, but more often anger, as unpleasant as it is, is just the one feeling that is less unpleasant than pain. So if you are having trouble identifying feelings of loss and pain, try getting in touch with your anger; guys especially. Usually anger is trying to tell you something about pain that you aren't getting, and if left untreated, tends to wound a lot of people you love.

3) The final reason to learn lament is because it is deeply Biblical and deeply part of our Armenian Church tradition. Our church tradition contains a lost language of lament that has always helped its faithful live an authentic and whole life, and I actually think recovering this lost language could be a gift of our church to the world. Because our entire modern society needs to learn the lost art of lament. Take the Parkland FL shooting which happened this week, which sadly is just the latest of a string of such tragedies in America. You can look to gun control for solving that problem, and we should. You can look to restoring family and cultural values to solve that problem, and we should. But if you really want to understand this problem, I think you have to look at our success driven, materialist society which creates a culture of denial and isolation.

Everything in American society encourages us to share our successes and positive experiences and to enjoy all our stuff, to cultivate our best selves and project that image on social media. But where do we express our real selves? What language do we use and with whom, to express and process our pains,

shames and losses? With the denial of anything but the positive in our culture, and the breakdown of traditional communities of support, who does one turn to when going through tough times? The answer, especially for young people, is no one. It gets stuffed down and it builds up, which leads to isolation, outrage and depression. In a culture where there is no outlet to acknowledge, express and deal with pain and suffering, it metastasizes into deep anger and deep isolation. That's what forms a mass shooter. What stops a mass shooter, or an addiction, or you and I yelling unfairly at our kids, is naming pain and sharing it with others and God, which builds tolerance to withstand it.

Conclusion

So in conclusion, that is really why I have embarked on this study that many of us, even I, sometimes would rather not get into it. But as your pastor, I am privileged to be made keenly aware of much of your loss pain and heartache. Of a family decimated by addiction. Of widows who just can't get through the pain and grief of the loss of their spouse. Of people so angry and controlling about small things that you know they are really wounded about big things. And of course I have my own.

But paradoxically, the greatest joy I have as a Christian and as a pastor, are those times where I have learned to stick with God or help others stick with God in the darkness; to learn to lament. Because only when we are real and vulnerable before God and others, is it possible to experience the grace of transformation which turns pain in endurance, darkness into light.

Because while the world we live in bids us to avoid, deny and flee from pain and suffering in 100 conscious and unconscious ways, our Bible and church tradition teaches us to embrace it, and shows us a way through. I will end with a reading from the Apostle Paul, who not only doesn't avoid suffering, he says we should boast in it…

"And not only that," says Paul, "but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Rom 5:3-5)."

(NOTE: IN PRESENTATON POINT #3 AND THE CONCLUSION WERE SHORTENED, AND IN ITS PLACE THERE WAS A FRUITFUL BRAINSTORM ABOUT THE RITUALS OF LAMENT WE HAVE IN OUR CHURCH, (PSALMS, TER VOGHORMEA, NAREK, HOLY FRIDAY BURIAL SERVICE, OOR ES MAYR IM, VAY INDZ, VAY INDZ, ETC.) WE TALKED ABOUT WHY RECOVERING THESE CORPORATE RITUALS OF LAMENT ARE SO IMPORTANT FOR THE HEALTH OF EACH OF US AND FOR OUR COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE TO COUNTERACT THE DENIAL OF PAIN BY OUR SOCIETY)