

“When The Community of Faith Laments”

About a week ago, a horrible, violent tragedy struck the New Way of Life AA group and struck down our community with feelings of fear, grief, sadness, anger, confusion, helplessness, hopelessness, betrayal and lost abandonment. The Enterprize reported the awful news with the sensationalized headline: “Did jealousy spark a murderous rage?” The article that followed gave society’s answer to the complex question: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Follow up reports bound the fears of the community by locating blame and letting the public know that the accused murderer was locked up and waiting arraignment. After a couple of fact finding days and in depth journalist analysis, the societal crisis was over. . . except, of course, for those who loved and knew both Lorraine and Eunice. For family, friends, and neighbors, the traumatic aftershock is just beginning.

For people of faith, spiritual questions often accompany the wake of traumatic emotional pain. Many people ask: “Where was God?” or “Why did God let this happen?” or “What kind of God would allow this to happen?” People who ask these questions believe that God intervenes in human affairs to reward the good people and to prevent bad things from happening to good people. There is an old West African fable that suggests that we learn such a limited understanding of God through our life encounters with people . . . and that our limited version can contribute to a spirituality of distrust and alienation that works against the unitive dynamics of God’s Love. I’ve told the fable of “God’s Hat” before, but it’s a good one to retell again today.

One day, God took a walk across the earth, disguised as an old tramp. He made his way through the fields, where a group of friends were working, and decided to have a little joke with them. He put on a hat that was red on one side, white on the other, green at the front and black at the back. As the friends walked home to their village that night, they talked about the old tramp. “Did you see that old man in the white hat walking through the fields?” asked the first. The second replied, ‘No, it was a red hat!’ ‘Don’t tell me that,’ retorted the first.

“It was definitely white!” ‘No, it wasn’t,’ argued the second. ‘I saw it with my own two eyes, and it was red!’ ‘You must be blind!’ said the first. ‘There’s nothing wrong with my eyes,’ snapped the second. “It’s you! You must be drunk!’ ‘You’re both blind,’ chimed in a third. ‘That fellow’s hat was green!’ ‘What’s the matter with you all?’ rejoined a fourth. ‘It was a black hat. Anyone could see that! You were obviously half asleep when he walked past. What fools you all are!’ And so the argument continued, and before they knew what was happening to them, the group of friends had become a band of enemies. And the strife continues. To this day, the descendants of those former friends still go on arguing. The White Hatters versus the Red Hatters, the Green Hatters, versus the Black Hatters--- each party believing that it knows, beyond any doubt, the colour of God’s Hat. As for God, God still walks the fields in disguise, saddened now. But the Mad Hatters are too fiercely embroiled in their arguments to notice

(Wisdom Stories by Margaret Silf, p.121- 122).

When tragedy strikes us down, what happens is that our Mad Hatter ego’s have---Eased God Out and eased in a personalized version of God that we have gleaned through interactions with people. The way in which communities of faith attempt to ‘find’ God’s again is through communal prayer. The kind of communal prayer that Jewish and Christian people often use when bad things happen is the lament.

Communal laments are important because they water our parched souls with refreshing, healing metaphors for God from scripture. In Psalm 80, the lamenting community called upon God, the Vinedresser and Shepherd. In their time of need, the community prayed to the One God of Israel who, in all times and places, works to restore and save God’s beloved people though Holy, attentive, and tender care. The Biblical image of God as Shepherd of the flock and Jesus as the Good Shepherd is well known. An extended meditation on Israel’s relationship with God as the vinedresser is found in Isaiah 5:1-7.

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard.
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines,
He built a watch-tower in the midst of it,

and hewed out a wine vat in it;

He expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?

When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured,

I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down,

I will make it a waste, it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be
overgrown with briars and thorns;

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel,

And the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;

He expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Communal laments are important because through them, the Holy Spirit mends our broken hearts by joining us with the compassion of God and the tears of Jesus. In the preface to her book, "Psalms of Lament," Ann Weems wrote: *This book is not for everyone. It is for those who weep and for those who weep with those who weep. It is for those whose souls struggle with the dailiness of faithkeeping in the midst of life's assaults and obscenities. This book is for those who are living with scalding tears running down their cheeks. On August 14, 1982, the stars fell from my sky. My son, my Todd, had been killed less than an hour after his twenty-first birthday. August 14, 1982 . . . and still I weep.* In her weeping, Ann wrote:

Jesus wept,

And in his weeping, he joined himself forever

To those who mourn,

He stands now throughout all time, this Jesus weeping,
with his arms about the weeping ones;

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

He stands with the mourners, for his name is God-with-us,
Jesus wept.

Community laments are important because our weakened will is restored as we weep with those who weep. Last Friday night after the AA meeting downstairs in the fellowship hall, upon request of our friends, we opened up our sanctuary for a service of prayer. Before the community had the opportunity to offer up prayers for themselves and others, I shared a psalm of personal lament which was written and prayed by Ann Weems.

O God, find me!

I am lost in the valley of grief, and I cannot see my way out.

My friends leave baskets of balm at my feet,

but I cannot bend to touch the healing to my heart.

They call me to leave this valley,

but I cannot follow the faint sound of their voices.

They sing their songs of love, but the words fade and vanish in the
wind.

They knock, but I cannot find the door.

They shout to me, but I cannot find the voice to answer.

O God, find me!

Come into this valley and find me! Bring me out of this land of
weeping,

O you to whom I belong, find me!

I will wait here, for you have never failed to come to me.

I will wait here, for you have always been faithful.

I will wait here, for you are my God,

and you have promised that you counted the hairs on my head.

Friday night, a multitude of lamenting souls gathered up their tears for God. We asked God to help us personally and to help everyone who was suffering in the wake of the tragedy. After each petition and intercession we prayed: **Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.** Even before we had finished our 'fix it please because I can't prayers,' the healing work of God had begun. The Holy Spirit came among us just as Ann Weems described in this poem.

In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life,
there is a deafening alleluia, rising from the souls
of those who weep, and of those who weep with those who weep.

If you watch, you will see, the hand of God
putting the stars back in their skies,
one by one.