

## Communion Sunday: Lament before Action

Matins, WNMC  
Nov. 3, 2019  
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Readings: Psalms 119:137-44; Isaiah 1:10-18; Luke 19:1-10; 2 Thess 1:1-4, 11-12

Hymn of Response: WHB # 474 "I hunger and I thirst"

Verse for reflection: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson they shall be like wool. (Isa 1:18)

I recently came across a statement in my reading that stopped me in my tracks. The statement is found in a recent commentary on Romans, written by Sylvia Keesmaat and Brian Walsh. In dealing with our ecological crisis, they draw on Paul's description, in Romans 8, of the whole of creation groaning and waiting for redemption (vss.18-25). Not only creation, but we ourselves are described by Paul as groaning inwardly, waiting for our redemption. Paul is calling us to lament, to grieve, to enter into the groaning of creation. But, why this emphasis on lament and grief? And here is the statement that caught me by surprise.

"Without grief we will not come anywhere near comprehending the depth of the problem, nor will we have a profound enough grasp of our need to repent. Unless we enter into that place of grief, it is too easy just to jump into solutions without having realized the depth of our sin" (Romans Disarmed, 2019, p. 178).

I think the authors are on to something important here. I wonder whether we as Mennonites are really comprehending the depth of the problems we are facing in the world today and our complicity in creating these problems. I also wonder whether we today need to learn to lament and grieve and show remorse over our part in creating these problems before we jump into action in trying to solve them.

I want to use this juxtaposition of action versus lament or grief, as a lens with which to examine two of our lectionary readings this morning.

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Zacchaeus was rich, successful, and obviously a first-class administrator. Zacchaeus was also a man of action. He understood what was involved in following Jesus.

Luke's description of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus is a masterpiece in short story-telling. Zacchaeus is vertically challenged and so he climbs a sycamore tree so he can get a glimpse of Jesus. Jesus looks up and finds Zacchaeus in the tree, and then suggests that the two of them meet in his house. Zacchaeus very quickly announces that he will give half of his possessions to the poor and pay restitution to the people he has defrauded as a tax collector. Jesus says to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house."

But wait a minute? This sounds a bit too abbreviated, and surely misses some important details. What was going on in Zacchaeus' mind and heart, before he met Jesus? Why did he even want to see Jesus in the first place? Was it mere curiosity? I doubt it, given the way the story unfolds.

Zacchaeus must have heard about Jesus before this event. He probably had heard from his colleague, Levi, a fellow tax-collector, who had put on a large banquet for Jesus. Luke describes this event earlier in his gospel. Here we find Jesus dialoguing with a large group of Levi's fellow tax collectors (Luke 5:29-32; cf. 15:1). And when some by-standers criticized him for such fraternizing, Jesus responded by saying, "I have come to call sinners to repentance." Amazing, really ---- that these tax collectors felt comfortable in Jesus' presence even though he called them sinners.

Zacchaeus may even have heard about Jesus' powerful parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector that Len focussed on last Sunday at matins. This parable is in fact found in the chapter just

before our reading in Luke. Remember, it was the tax-collector who went home justified because he admitted he was a sinner and cried to God for mercy (Luke 18:9-14).

Back to the story of Zacchaeus. I wonder, did Zacchaeus already recognize himself to be a sinner, even before he had this personal encounter with Jesus? Was he longing for a better way, a better way of life personally and professionally?

I suspect Zacchaeus was lamenting his complicity in a corrupt system of extortion in collecting taxes long before he personally met Jesus. And that is why when Jesus called him and told him that he wanted to visit him in his house “today,” Zacchaeus “hurried down and was happy to welcome him” (vs. 6). Zacchaeus was ready, and he didn’t care at all that there were critics around him, just as there were at Levi’s banquet, who were grumbling about Jesus being a guest of a sinner (vs. 7). He already recognized that he was a sinner, and he was lamenting this fact, but he also knew that Jesus welcomed sinners.

And that is why Zacchaeus knows exactly what he must do to move beyond lament and grief and repentance. He needed to give to the poor, and he needed to pay restitution to those whom he had defrauded.

And that is also why Jesus was able to say, “Today, salvation has come to this house.” (vs. 9).

Our reading from the book of Isaiah follows a pattern that is similar to the story of Zacchaeus. It starts with a description of Israel’s hypocrisy in worship. But then there is a shift of focus to action - a shift that we as Mennonites resonate with. “Stop doing wrong... Learn to do good, seek justice, and plead the cause of the oppressed” (vss. 16-17).

But we are in danger of missing a phrase that is squeezed in between all this action: “Wash yourselves, and make yourselves clean” (vs. 16).

In fact the chapter from which our reading is taken begins with lament, with God who is grieving over the disobedience of Israel (1:2). Listen to verse 2: “Hear O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me” (1:2). And the lament continues, describing the consequences of Israel’s rebellion, with the LORD grieving over the suffering that Israel is experiencing because of its rebellion. And God invites Israel to join him in his lament over their sins.

Then comes the call to action I referred to earlier. But after this comes one of the most famous expressions of grace in the Bible: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson they shall be like wool” (Isa 1:18).

Lament and forgiving grace must precede action and will in fact lead to a deeper level of action than if we jump into finding solutions without first having realized the depth of our sin. That is surely the message of this passage in the book of Isaiah, as well as in our reading in Luke.

So, as we prepare for communion, let’s remember the importance of lament and repentance for our own brokenness and for our complicity in the brokenness of this world. Let’s remember Jesus who offered himself for us and for the world. “This is my body, broken for you.” “This is my blood which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins.”