

What Have We Done?

Shepherd's Grace Church

October 6, 2013 (World Communion Sunday)

Luke 17:5-10

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. ⁷"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? ⁸Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? ⁹Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" (Also read Lamentations 1: 1-6)

Context: This Sunday morning we celebrate World Communion Sunday. The table is set with breads from many different cultures. Cups and plates are from all the places we have traveled on mission trips. The table is not set on the altar this morning, but rather is pulled out front as a part of the sermon presentation and worship. Imagine celebrating communion with all your friends, family and fellow Christians from around the world! Today we feast!

We don't talk about the book of Lamentations much! I doubt that the Bible on your nightstand is open to this book or that you have even spent much time looking forward to reading this book of the Bible. First of all let me say that I am glad you have a Bible on your nightstand. I am confident that all of you do! Secondly, however, let me commend Lamentations as one you MUST read at least sometime! Read in context it offers scintillating details of the exile of the Israelites to Babylon. It offers a picture of those who are left behind and the emotions they experience as they wonder what and if God will restore their land and fulfill His promise! In addition, Lamentations offers a reminder of the role of human beings in God's work and in the preparation of God's coming and present kingdom!

It is this point that I want to dwell on for a few minutes today. What is our role in God's work? What are we supposed to do as we see a world broken, beaten, battered seemingly beyond repair? How should we involve ourselves in the care required for such a world? The very title of the book, Lamentations, provides the answer. To lament is to recognize, to express frustration, to show concern, but not to move! By that, I do not mean that we are to do nothing! Far from it!

The Hebrews as they experienced exile did not sit idly commiserating with one another. They listed the conditions in which they found themselves; streets empty, young men removed, without food, temple

ransacked. They sought to recognize their situation not so they could fix it but so they could seek to understand it. They lamented, calling to mind the circumstances that had created this situation so they might generate understanding! They did not seek to change their current situation but rather to grasp it by appreciating the fullness of it and by considering the cause.

Often times when I work with victims of abuse I encourage them to lament. I encourage them to look back at their lives and to recognize the causes for their pain. Very often as they do, they discover that the result of their current situation was not of their own making. They were not at fault. They did not provoke the abuse, they did not perpetrate the abuse. They were victims. They were the poor, the widowed, the orphaned who should have been cared for but were not. They were the injured. As the injured, they were not expected to forgive, and they were not expected to fix. They were expected to heal and to anticipate a time when the crimes against them would be dealt with in a righteous manner!

Often times as I talk with others about survivors of abuse they do not want to lament. They want to claim understanding. They want to say, "I understand exactly what you (or they) are going through." They want to fix the problem because they just know they have the solution! They just know how other people feel because they know they can impose their own experience in a situation or circumstance as the universal experience. Everyone must experience things in exactly the way they do!

When I was a kid, I was playing little league baseball. The first baseman was a good friend of mine. One game we were playing our archrivals! The game was tied and we needed to hold the other team to no runs so we could have our chance at last bats. There were runners on second and third with two outs. A routine ground ball was hit to my friend. I had seen him make the play dozens of times before. He should have scooped the ball up, trotted to first, stepped on the bag to record the out and we would be out of the inning. Somehow, inexplicably, my friend lifted up at the very last instant. The ball went through his legs and into the outfield. Two runs scored. We got the very next batter out but the damage had been done. We ended up losing the game and my friend sat in tears in the dugout for several minutes after the game.

Years later I was sitting with this same friend watching a Major League Play-Off game when, with two outs, Bill Buckner, first baseman for the Chicago Cubs, let a routine ground ball go between his legs. The Cubs had not been to a world series for more than 100 years and as a result of Buckner's error, they were once again denied! My friend looked over at me and said, "Remember that play in little league? I know just how Buckner feels!"

On the night of our little league game there might have been 20 people watching. Most of those were family members and not real fans. Some were delighted that my friend made the error because it meant their team won the game! When Buckner made his error there were 50,000 in the stands! There were millions more watching on T.V.. The whole city of Chicago was hanging on every play! My friend

might have remembered what it felt like to raise up an instant to soon on a routine play but I think you and I can recognize that he had no idea what Buckner felt like as he let his team, his fans, his city down when he committed that error in front of literally millions of people!

The truth is that even if the situations were identical between my friend and Bill Buckner the experiences would still have been totally different! The two people come from different backgrounds, have different cultural references, have different support systems and different ways of coping with mistakes. Bill Buckner could not have appreciated my friend's error any more than my friend could have appreciated his. Neither could have known "exactly how the other one felt!"

When we offer comfort to others regarding the difficulties they are facing we do them and ourselves a tremendous disservice if we try to tell them we know how they feel! We cannot possibly know how another feels because we do not have their background, experiences or relationships to draw on. When we come along side another who is in need of our care, God invites us to do something else. He invites us to bring our experiences, our compassion, our sense of self to the situation and suggest to the other that we are there for them. We are willing to walk with them. We are willing to listen as they cry. We are willing to lament their situation! It is through lament that we can truly validate another's circumstance.

I believe this is exactly where the Hebrew bible lesson meets the lesson from the gospel this morning! When the disciples ask Jesus to "increase our faith," they are asking as He encourages them to forgive. In the passage just before our conversation today, Jesus is talking to the disciples and encouraging them to forgive. Forgiveness, He says, is not just something we are to do once, but again and again! Further, he says we must do this with other believers, other disciples! It is particularly difficult to forgive others who believe as we do!

It is hard because we know that we struggle with the same kinds of temptations that others struggle with. When someone professes to believe in the same principles of faith we believe in and we see them sin against God and those principles, we are quick to condemn. We know we have struggled and in that instance, have overcome the temptation. Then when we see another who is unable to overcome, we are quick to condemn and slow to forgive. Forgiveness takes great faith.

Forgiveness requires that we trust someone or something greater than ourselves to be righteous in judgment and to correct the behavior we abhor! Forgiveness requires that we allow God to be in control of every situation. The disciples believed as they were taught; that a transgressor should be ostracized, put out of the community and shunned! Now Jesus has told them that they are responsible for building their own relationships in the community. Further, he has told them that they are always responsible, not just at the first offense, but at each and every offense! The disciples are told they must trust the heart of the sinner and the righteousness of God!

In that moment, they recognize the difficulty of being a disciple of Jesus. They know they cannot accomplish what Jesus is asking on their own! They remember what Jesus has said back in chapter 9, "if anyone would be my disciple they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." To look past the offense of another, especially when we recognize that we have been tempted in the same way is truly to deny self. It is hard, it is heavy, and it is hopeful! It is hopeful because it affirms for them, and for us that another, one who is more powerful than we will assist us!

The act of forgiveness invites us to realize that for a moment others are at our mercy. They are, in a sense, our slaves. They are our slaves because we have a power over them. We have the power to judge. They know they have done wrong. We know they have done wrong. We hold their emotions in our hands and we have the power to validate their feelings or to crush them! Jesus says, in that moment when the slave, the one over whom we exercise power, comes to us we have two choices. First, we could say to that one, come, sit, eat, rest and find peace. The second choice is to say be in my service. You are my slave! We could hold ownership over that person.

Jesus says, our natural response, the response we would like to make is the second. He says we would like not to forgive, we would like to have that person be in our debt. In some ways we would like to hold that person hostage. In some ways, we are not different than our first century Christian relatives. We have been taught that sin requires repentance. We have been taught that sin requires the sinner to serve a penance. In the Catholic tradition, penance is the word that has been used. When people confess their sins, they are told to do penance and their sins will be forgiven.

The tradition comes honestly from the Hebrew Bible where in Leviticus there are instructions for specific sins committed against the community and the punishments (penance) individuals should be made to incur! The word Jesus gives to his disciples is a hard word. Forgive. Even if a person continues to commit the same sin against you as many as seven times a day, forgive! Old teaching and old habits die hard however. We still would like to make the individual pay.

What harm can there be in that? Why is it so necessary that we forgive. In Romans 2, Paul says that unless we forgive others, we are guilty of committing exactly the same sins they have committed. As we judge, so are we judged, and there is none of us who can stand up to that judgment. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God, Paul goes on to say in chapter 3. Forgiveness on our part is essential to our eternal life. If we judge others, we will be judged in exactly the same way!

So what is the solution? How can we avoid that which we have been taught to do? How can we overcome our own teaching and turn to a new lesson? The answer lies at the table which is set before us this morning. We receive communion ever first Sunday but this month, the table is different. On this table are black breads, brown breads, white breads, risen breads and flat breads. The loaves are

different sizes and different shapes. The loaves are to remind us of our differences but they are to remind us also of our similarities!

At nearly the end of Luke's gospel, he reminds us that on the night Jesus was betrayed he took the bread. If he is celebrating the Passover with his disciples, he took flat bread called Matzah. We most often think of Jesus celebrating this meal. If he was celebrating at a meal other than Passover, he was celebrating with leavened bread. John suggests that this might have been the case since Jesus, Himself was the Passover bread. We have both. As we eat, whether we eat leavened or unleavened it gives us nourishment. The nutrients we receive are the same. The meal we eat is the same. The differences are lost in the uniqueness we experience as individuals. We all eat and that which we eat nourishes us in the same way. In the difference of the meal, in the difference of the bread we become the same. We become family! We sit at the same table and eat the same meal!

A few weeks ago, I was asked to say the blessing at my brother and sister-in-law's 15th wedding anniversary celebration. Not many people give an elaborate party for this celebration but Trisha's mom can go a bit overboard at times! Having said that, I was taught that a pastor should be ready on a moment's notice to preach, pray or die. I thought, "At least she is not asking me to die!" and I readily agreed to pray!

The first words I offered in the prayer were, "God, what have YOU done!" My intent was to focus on the different families, the brides side and the grooms side recognizing that even in the midst of our differences, the different cultures, backgrounds and experiences God had brought us all together around that anniversary table as one body! We were united by two people who fell in love and who lived that love together in such a compelling way as to bring all of us together; even on a Saturday night when KU was playing football and K-State was playing football and the Cardinals were attempting to win their baseball division and when there were many other options for entertainment! God had moved beyond the desires of any one person to cause all of us to gather round the table! He had invited us to sit, to eat, to enjoy!

A little later, I talked to Eric, Rochelle's brother and said that the way I really should have phrased the opening line was, "God, WHAT have you done!" implying that God had created a situation that was way out of control. In a way this statement would have been equally correct. There is no way we can know what God has planned for us when we marry. There is no way we can know with whom God will call us to sit down at His table. The table that is before us this morning is beyond our control. While we might like to control it, or even try to control it, the table is of God's choosing and the guests we sit with are the ones He has invited!

Each of the guests is a sinner! Each of them worthy to come to the table only by God's grace supplied by His Son, Jesus. God's grace is "God's Riches At Christ's Expense." The difference we see at the table

becomes insignificant when we realize that none of us is worthy on our own merit to be there. The different colors of bread, the different shapes, the different leavens do not matter. What matters is that all will nourish us and all will provide us with the energy we need to accomplish God's purposes.

As we look further, we see that each person around the table is different also. We are all different colors, from different backgrounds and cultures. We all come from different economic and political philosophies. We all struggle through our daily lives but we all are at the table. We are all there despite our struggles and not because of them. God does not take our struggles away. He does not minimize the challenges we have in life just to bring us to the table. Today, he brings us all to the table; he brings us all together because of our differences. God knows that our differences will be our greatest strength. He knows we are all sinners. He knows we have all fallen short of His desire for us, but God alone has overcome our sin! At the table with us is the one who takes away the sin of the world.

At the table is the one who redeems us and invites us to conquer our fears and face our foes. At the table is the one who alone allows us to once again be worthy to dine in the presence of the Lord. When confronted with this reality, what shall we do? How shall we respond? The disciples responded, "Lord increase our faith!"

The disciples did not need more faith! They did not require additional confidence in Jesus! They knew who he was! They only needed to remind themselves of who he was. When Jesus responded to their request, he said, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed you would be able to command this mulberry tree." He was not admonishing the disciples! He was reminding the disciples of that which they already knew! They had ample faith! They knew what they needed to know! They were welcome at the table already! Not because of what they had done, but because of what God had done in them!

It is the same for us! We seek more faith. We come and we listen and we learn and we try to understand. The problem for us, the same problem our first century ancestors encountered is that we often miss salvation in our lives by about a foot; the distance between our heart and our head. We allow the words to go in, but we never allow them to sink in, to become a part of us. We become too busy trying to justify our right to judge that we fail to recognize our own guilt which has been redeemed by God's grace just as has the guilt of the other been redeemed!

We want the other person to pay for their transgressions while failing to recognize that God has already made payment in full! We fail to recognize that the slave who comes in from the field first is us! We are slave to our own sin and shortcomings and we have no hope of ever being anything else. We are only at God's mercy and if we want to eat anything we first have to serve.

God gives us another option. In the meal Jesus shares, he reminds his disciples that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve! Jesus shows the example we are to follow. We are to serve the

sinner! We are to invite the sinner! We are to feel the sinner so the sinner will know what we, as sinners, already know! God's grace is sufficient for us! God's love is available to us...to all of us! God's purpose, God's mission is that all of us should know this, but more, that all of us should share this. This is the real food we eat today on world communion Sunday! The meal of understanding that is offered as Jesus says, "Take, Eat, I will eat later! This is my body, the bread of life, which is given for all!"

After we have eaten, then we can hear the words Jesus offers at the end of the message today. Just as slaves do what is commanded of them and we offer them no thanks, so to we recognize that we are like them. Regardless of our color, or economic circumstance or our status in life we are slaves! We owe God our life and without His grace we would live only to die but because of his grace we can look forward to eternal life!

Our meal today is the food of life! It invites us to say remember that we have done nothing but Oh My, "God, What have You done!" Amen!