

“Wisdom from the Margins: Lamentations, Part Two”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for July 29th 2018 (Tenth Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Lamentations 5: 1-22

There can, of course, be no doubting that the fifth and final chapter of *Lamentations* is very much cut from the same fabric as the rest of this, the third of the five Old Testament scrolls to which we have been attending this summer. Like the book's first four chapters, the reality reflected in the book's fifth, is a thoroughly bleak reality: the word bleak not really doing justice to the horror of which we here read, the horror of civic destruction, personal and corporate humiliation, exile and shame.

*Princes are hung up by their hands;
no respect is shown to the elders.
Young men are compelled to grind at the mill,
and boys stagger under loads of wood.
The old men have left the city gate,
the young men their music.
The joy of our hearts has ceased;
our dancing has been turned to mourning.
The crown has fallen from our head;
woe to us, for we have sinned!
For this our heart has become sick,
for these things our eyes have grown dim...*

What was true of our reading from the book's first chapter last Sunday, remains true of the book's final chapter; the world depicted in *Lamentations* is filled with pain, with grief, with lament. That having been said.

It is nonetheless fair to claim that the book's final chapter appears to be set apart from the rest of the book with a fair degree of intentionality. As I mentioned last Sunday, each of the first four chapters takes the form of an acrostic: the first verse of each chapter beginning with, aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, followed (in order) by 21 further verses working their way through each letter of that alphabet, although—I hasten to add—the book's third chapter does all of that in an especially fancy way! But the final chapter...the final chapter breaks that pattern; although it too contains 22 verses (one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet), unlike the other chapters there is no alphabet pattern explicitly used. More importantly: unlike the book's first four chapters—which address their woes to anyone willing to listen—the book's final chapter, appropriately, consists of one long prayer: a lament, a lament addressed to none other than God. A lament placing before God one paramount concern: namely that God should not forget this people in their distress, that God should not forget but rather remember. And so the prayer begins with this heartfelt cry:

*Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us;
look, and see our disgrace!*

And the prayer ends by returning to that basic theme of remembrance:

*Why do you forget us forever,
why do you forsake us for so many days?
Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored!
Renew our days as of old...*

Restore us! Renew us! But first and foremost, do not forget us. Remember us in our misery! Remember us in your enduring love!

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It should be duly noted...duly noted at the outset, that remembrance is a key Biblical theme. On the one hand, we are repeatedly told that the God of the Bible is the God who remembers: beginning with God's promise to remember the covenant God made with Noah. On the other hand, God's people are also called to remember: including explicit calls for ancient Israel to remember the day when God freed them from bondage in Egypt, explicit calls for God's people to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, as well as Christ's explicit command to his disciples that any time they break bread and lift the cup, they do so in remembrance of him. It is then, entirely fitting, that we who are commanded to remember, beseech God to keep his end of the bargain. Indeed!

Given how fragile our memories tend to be, we are wise to implore God to step in when our memories fail. I always find myself smiling wryly when I read obituaries that promise the deceased, that those who follow will **always** cherish them in their hearts, will **forever** remember them. That may work out quite nicely for a generation or two. I certainly remember my parents...as do my children. But their children? Their children's children?? You see: to promise **always** to remember is to make a promise that we cannot possibly keep. To promise **forever** to remember is to commit to the carrying of a burden we ourselves are not capable of carrying. Furthermore...

...furthermore...

...the making of such a promise may actually entail far more anguish...far more anguish than any of us are really and truly prepared to undergo.

Let's not kid ourselves: memory can be a painful thing. One of my very favorite websites—a website that bears the marvelous title, *Eclectic Orthodoxy*—that website is hosted by an Anglican Priest who was known as Father Alvin Kimel until he became an Eastern Orthodox Priest at which point he subsequently became known as Father Aidan Kimel. His website—it's really an elaborate blog—his website contains a rich cornucopia of reflections: some of them quite accessible, others dense and forbidding!

The other day he published an extended reflection that bore the provocative title: “Remembering and Forgetting, Depression and the Healing of Memories.” In that reflection, Father Aidan acknowledges his own struggles—not merely for many years but over the decades—his ongoing struggles with the scourge of depression.

He writes: “remembering and forgetting—even after all these years of prayer and counseling, I find that specific memories and mental patterns still control much of my life. They seem to be prayer- and therapy-resistant. I would change the way I see things, yet I do not. The disappointments, losses, and humiliations, failures and sins, wounds received and wounds inflicted, cry out for my constant attention. The old memories come alive in the middle of the night or when I am trying to relax or when I am meditating with the Jesus Prayer. I try to shift my attention—breathe in and breathe out, return to the words of the prayer. The memories may quiet for a spell. They bide their time, like a wolf patiently waiting for its prey to let down its guard.”

He continues by quoting an ancient pagan philosopher. “It is rather difficult to forget unwanted memories at will,” comments the philosopher. To which Father Aidan adds: “The painful memories are charged with power and suffering. Yet they are not the only memories. I also have memories of great loves, wondrous beauties, transfiguring joys, memories of peace and wholeness. Some of them are only a day-old. They are my true life. Yet it is the former [the painful memories!] to which I too often attend.”

Make no mistake about it! Remembrance can be painful...at times remembrance can be deeply traumatic. Even those of us who do not struggle with chronic depression or formally diagnosed post-traumatic distress disorder ought to be clear on at least that much.

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We should also be clear...we should also be clear that memory, remembrance, recollection, can be a deeply dangerous and divisive enterprise.

On Friday, the United Church of Canada concluded its 43rd General Council, which met this time in Oshawa. As was true of the final General Council I attended—the one held in Thunder Bay in 2006—this year’s Council ended on a note of division, having to do with the very different memories different segments of our church bring to the one table. On the final day of the meeting—Friday—having heard the concerns of some of the Commissioners from minority backgrounds, including Aboriginal people and people of colour, youth at the Council put forward a motion repenting of (and asking the church as a whole) to repent of our colonial past, repentance that would include both acknowledgment of “white-privilege” and a commitment to make the necessary changes that would help us to address what are perceived as ongoing vestiges of that past and continued instances of those privileges. It made for an uneasy ending to what had been, up until that point in time, a smooth-sailing General Council.

And I will insist that memory is very much a part of this painful discussion: for while it is most certainly the case that we belong to one humanity—and that in the Church we are “one in Christ”—in actual fact, even within the unity of the Christian faith, we all belong to storied-communities with memories that pull us in very different directions. When you hear someone throwing around the now-fashionable terms—post-modern, post-modernity, post-modernism—those are just fancy ways of calling attention to the fact that we no longer live in the world of **Christendom** in which the Christian story was **the** defining story for everyone other than the small Jewish minority, and furthermore that we no longer live in a **modern world** in which the science-story if the defining story for all right-thinking people. No! In post-modernity, we are part of world that harbours many different communities, each of whom nurture differing accounts (different stories) of what gives life—what gives their lives—meaning. And yes: while I will always call “nonsense” on those who want to maintain that religion has been the cause of all wars...

...yes, that is nonsense, nonsense on steroids!...

...what may be closer to the truth is that all wars involve conflicts between communities who have different understandings of the world: different understandings, different stories and yes, different memories, recollections, remembrances that they nurture, that they seek to keep alive. Memories, recollections, remembrances that are held to be worth living for, if need be worth dying for and yes, alas: if need be worth killing for. Maybe...just maybe...we would be better off were we able simply to forget. Not just forgive, but forget! At times that seems like an irresistible solution to all that ails us. And yet. And yet.

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Milan Kundera, a writer originally from Czechoslovakia who has made his home in France for many decades: Kundera lived through the Communist nightmare in his home and native land. As a matter of fact, he started out—in the late ‘40s and ‘50s—he started out as something of a true believer, eventually becoming disillusioned after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Russians in 1968. In his novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera takes as his theme the fragile nature of human memory, and the ongoing temptation for us to forget both past and present pain, rather than remember that which is guaranteed to haunt us in the very act of recalling it.

Kundera notes that one of the first actions taken by the puppet-government that was installed after the Russian invasion, was to drive “one hundred forty-five Czech historians from the universities and research institutes.” One of those historians said to Kundera: “You begin to liquidate a people...by taking away its memory. You destroy its books, its culture, its history. And then others write other books for it, give another culture to it, invent another history for it. Then the people slowly begins to forget what it is and what it was. The world at large forgets it still faster.” Which is to suggest that remembrance—painful and at times dangerous though it often is—remembrance is nonetheless an essential part of our humanity, a non-negotiable part of our humanity.

That's why diseases such as Alzheimer's are so uniquely painful for those who stand by helplessly as a loved one begins to fade into the distance: one memory at a time. Witnessing the physical decline of someone we love is painful enough; witnessing the gradual slipping away of their capacity to remember is far more devastating. When we lose our grasp on our memories, there is a very real sense in which we appear to have lost our personhood, appear to have lost our standing in the human community.

Hence the essential rightness...the essential rightness of the prayer with which the book *Lamentations* draws to its close. *Do not forget us, O God*: even if we thereby find **ourselves** unable to forget things we would just as soon forget. *Remember O Lord, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace*: even though we **ourselves** would just as happily forget all about our disgrace. Remember us and help us also to remember and not forget. Remember us...and keep remembrance alive in our hearts and minds, O God! In many ways, that is the most essential, the most universal of prayers: a prayer that is indeed worthy of the praying! And yet it is a prayer which, if answered, can bring to mind a host of recollections that deliver more by way of tears, than by way of laughter, more by way of bitterness than by way of relief.

And it struck me just the other day that remembrance—in a world without God...better still in a world in which any god other than the God-of-love held sway—it struck me that in a godless world, we would be better off with “laughter and forgetting”, than with the blood, sweat and tears (which is to say the ongoing anguish and potential division) caused by our at times over-heated acts of remembrance. The act of remembrance may well define our humanity as few other acts define it, but no one should pretend that remembrance is any less in need of God's power to heal than any other human act. To pray for God to remember us, without immediately also praying—as *Lamentations* rightly prays—for restoration and renewal, in short, to pray for the gift of remembrance without explicitly making that also a prayer for healing, would be to pray a fool's prayer. Indeed!

I found myself, just this morning, pondering the well-known Serenity prayer:

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things
I cannot change,
courage to change
the things I can,
and the wisdom
to know the difference.*

Found myself recalling that prayer and **adapting** that prayer to this morning's theme.

**God: grant me the serenity
to remember without bitterness,
those things I dare not forget,
the forbearance to relinquish those remembrances**

**I can safely put to one side,
and the abiding hope
that at the end of time,
you will cleanse heart and mind:
so that your love and your love alone
will fill every corner of your eternal realm
of joy and peace.**

Friends in Christ: may that be **our** prayer, this day and always.

Amen!