

The Truth of Rachel's Tears

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I am deeply aware everyday of the painful impact that injustice has on people's lives. As Indian elder and Presbyterian deacon, I know it is important to walk with others in their experience.

Every day I want to cry over people and places in the daily news, global headlines, prayer requests: Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Justine Damond, Standing Rock, So Sudan, Syria- Crying is exhausting, but breathing takes Courage. Courage to inhale, exhale the breath of life. Courage can come from nurturing resilience, sometimes it is just stubborn grit and spirit to endure. What does scripture say about how we can sustain the courage we need in the face of horrific tragedy and pain? Let's look at this story of Rachel. It is one of lament, a story of how you remember those who you love most in the world, when they are also the very ones that the world most fears to remember. A thousand years ago or yesterday, when we lament, we wrestle with what is true about the world, the hard truth about our humanity, intimately living out the psalmist cries to God for healing and peace. This story summons us to experience lamentation as part of our liturgy, immersing ourselves, preparing the church to stay engaged in the real healing of injustice. To worship without lament is to accept an unexamined life without history, to ignore truths waiting to be heard, voices struggling to find expression.

It is about the indomitable Rachel at a place called Ramah. Rachel was the wife of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, claiming a place in Israel's history as the mother of Joseph. But she does not survive giving birth to the youngest, Benjamin, and she is buried at Ramah. Now Ramah was also where Nebuchadnezzar (in tragic parallel to President Andrew Jackson) deported the Jews under the Judah Removal Act, sending them on their Trail of Tears into captivity in Babylon. Ramah is a place of tragedy. .

Zora Neale Hurston, one of America's black writers, once said, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story within you." So here, even the earth at Ramah, labors over these traumatized families, transfiguring Rachel's story from a mother grieving the loss of her dreams to the eternal mother who mourns ceaselessly over *an entire nation facing extermination*. So a thousand years later, the prophet Jeremiah remembers: "This says Jehovah: a voice is heard in

Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping. Rachel weeping for her children; refusing to be comforted for her children FOR THEY ARE NO MORE.”

The heart-wrenching translation means that these children “each were not – they were extinguished.” They were not nameless. Each mother, each father, each grandparent searching for the stolen generation remembered the names of specific children to lament. Like those relatives, kinfolk, who mourn, search, and protest for the disappeared ones in Latin America, for native women in Canada, for schoolgirls in Nigeria or trafficked teens from SE Asia. *And like Rachel, they refuse to be comforted*

Until, in this very place, God speaks to her, admonishing her to refrain from her inconsolable weeping with a promise that her children would return. From Old Testament to New Testament, we see other historical parallels in this passage, the forced captivity and exile of Israel, the slaughter of Hebrew infants by an Egyptian Pharaoh, the infanticide of baby boys in Bethlehem under Herod., or the genocide of indigenous in the Americas, or Armenians, or Jews or innocents in Sandy Hook or Twin Towers in NYC, or Champs-Elysees [Shamp Selee Zay], or Bosnia. Nevertheless, in the cries of grief and anguish amidst the monumental trauma and heartbreak of captivity, somewhere a whisper of hope is remembered and a imagined future is awakened by a Moses , David, Esther, Chief Joseph, Sojourner Truth, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King,

Just as Rachel was comforted after the labor of waiting, struggling for survival through years of disappointment, can the Church provide hope that justice will prevail. To push us into a reality we hadn't imagined. “Be strong, be courageous, do not dismay, God is with us wherever we go. We can reclaim space for repair, healing, peace, witness.

Hope may be fragile, buried beneath our historical trauma, but there is truth in Rachel's tears. **The Lord speaks to Rachel**, bidding her to refrain from mourning. God rewards her dedication to the terrible grief, her fierce resistance to any appeal to erase her loss, her sustained liturgical "work" of lamentation over death and diaspora. The Lord yields and promises that the children will return and redeem their homeland and restore the KIN-dom of God. God promises that we will see what we could never see. The Yes of God can never be mis-heard

When the people grieve, Rachel laments with them. Without such spiritual solidarity, **we might be tempted to solve the desperation of the world without** proximity to Christ's brokenness, without an intimacy with those for whom Christ died.

Only in claiming the brokenness of our communities by understanding the real fear of loss and pain deep in the core of our human existence, can we proclaim the repair that God offers in Christ.

We heard a great deal about “reparation” during the synod meeting this spring from our speaker, Dr. Jennifer Harvey [Dear White Christians], who offered new paradigms of reparations or frames – Bold and courageous promises of atonement, restitution, repair, compensation and reward. Just like the Yes, God spoke to Rachel- Yes, I will amend your grief, Yes, you can stop crying, Yes, you will be rewarded for your work.

God interrupts and speaks to the historical trauma of a broken people in a violent world, to console Rachel and nations so needing a promise of hope. God says wipe your tears, for those who you mourn, for those who have been kidnapped, trafficked, imprisoned, brutalized or enslaved, they will be restored and reconciled to you. The courage of Rachel’s tears is to call for a true repair of the historical wounds suffered across generations, a call for healing from the oppression of people and the land.

And God speaks over the chaos and anger and pain and fatigue to say, Yes to Truth. First, we must remember to anchor our identity to real truths of the past, and provide context for our present and future. God’s YES also leads us to recall and expose where the church concealed the complicity of injustice and exploitation in our national history. And God’s YES compels us to recognize the invisible but real costs of institutional privilege. The healing of the nation comes through payment for your grief, repairing what was broken, reparation for the people and restoring the land. “I will reward you AND your children will come back home, to the sacred land of their birth.”

Remember we stand in the midst of history. Remember we each are bound to one another, shaping each other’s history. Yes, we have to create space to lament our life as the oppressor or the oppressed. In his latest book, “Blue-Note Preaching in a Post Soul World”, the Rev Otis Moss III says: **BE SENSITIVE TO THE MOMENT WHEN WE MUST MAKE A SHIFT, BECAUSE WE MAY MISS AN OPPORTUNITY TO COMMUNICATE CLEARLY TO SOMEONE WHO NEEDS TO HEAR THAT WHICH HAS BEEN GIVEN TO US ...p58**

To lament is an acknowledgment that our world is full of pain, death and injustice. To lament is also a confession of our humanity, and an invocation for God to intervene with righteousness and repair. When we lament in worship, we experience uncensored communion with God, worship where we can be honest in our remembrance, reflection, recovery and repentance.

In the Book Preparing for Un-natural Disasters, [John Knox Press] I read that “recovery establishes a place of goodness that can tolerate disappointment or distress and find courage to endure>”

What does this mean for the church? To be a worshipping community reaching toward wholeness? **TELL THE TRUTH ABOUT YOURSELF, AND OTHER PEOPLE WILL**

LEARN THEY CAN TELL THE TRUTH, TOO. TELL THE TRUTH IN CHURCH, AND THE CHURCH WILL RESIST BEING SILENT. Lament teaches truth to us when we can't imagine what the truth is.

Imagine: The moment you realize BLM march is not about angry black teens, but black teens carrying generations of pain and fear and loss of other black men and women and children... IS OUR CHURCH A PLACE WHERE YOUNG BLACK MEN FEEL SAFE ENOUGH TO CRY OVER THE LOSS OF THEIR FUTURES? TO CRY OUT, IF WE ARE GOING TO DIE, WOULD ANYONE CARE? WOULD WE BE FORGOTTEN? WOULD ANYONE MOURN OUR DEATH?

The truth of Rachel's Tears can help the church engage the pain of the world. Offer sacred space where pastors and members might see what they've never noticed before. Compelling stories waiting to be told, to be heard, struggling to find expression. Contrary to the assumptions about ourselves and others, to become a community surrounding those children struggling to heal themselves and restore the land.

You too may have heard folks ask why we pray prayers of confession about being lost in sin, when we are more concerned about being hopelessly lost in all the chaos, hurt and injustice of the world. We must dedicate truth telling in worship as part of our liturgy. Congregations that courageously anchor their identity in the work of lament get closer to the communion table. We need each other to become the beloved community. Sometimes we also need space and opportunity for truth, for uncensored conversations. Sometimes we need God to say, yes, there is hope for the future. Your children will come home and restore the world. That is Good News, That is Truth.

Prayer- Holy Creator, teach us to come before you in humility, lamenting the signs that your KIN-dom has not yet come in its fullness. Help us to acknowledge our real history, and guide us into a journey of truthful remembering, honest repenting, and faithful responding. May we cry with Rachel in the world today, relentlessly, waiting for the coming of your Kin-dom in Jesus Christ, our older brother and door to truth. Amen.