

East Liberty Presbyterian Church
The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
September 26, 2010
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
“A Grieving Faith”

What prompts people to come to church, to walk up the sidewalk, through our big Penn Avenue doors, down the long center aisle, and sit in these pews? Hopefully in many cases today, people are visiting because you've invited them. People come to church because a friend or family member also attends. Or they come to church because they know that their life is richer through weekly prayer, bible study, and worshipping the God who made them and loves them. Those are positive, proactive reasons to come to church. But people also come to church from reactive reasons – something has happened in their life that they are trying to understand, so they come to church looking for answers. Or some loss or tragedy has befallen them, so they come to church looking for a word of hope during their season of pain.

During the week people often stop by and sit in our sanctuary for a while, perhaps to pray or to think or to ask God the questions weighing down their souls. People come here and see the carving of Christ at the Last Supper, see the glorious windows reflecting light and color, and rest in the stillness of a space where people have prayed for years and years. They come in seeking something, knowing that they can't find this type of space at home watching a cable TV religious service or in a modern church auditorium with stadium seating.

But after spending time alone with your thoughts and prayers to God, there comes a next step that says, “I need to be with others.” Now, that can be risky because people are kind of quirky. Not that this is true of anyone here today, but sometimes people can be a real pain in the tuchis, if you'll pardon my Yiddish. You want to share your troubles with others and all they want to do is tell you theirs, and how theirs are worse than yours. People can be distracted and forgetful; they don't understand what you're going through; their cell phone goes off halfway through your conversation; they can't keep a secret – oy vey! And yes, some of those same people are in church, because church is not a museum for perfectly-preserved human specimens but a gathering place for wounded souls and prodigal sons and daughters. As my Baptist friends would say, “Can I get an Amen?”

When you are troubled or afraid or wounded, you first need some time alone to sort it out or to pray to God; but eventually you say “I need to be with others.” An interesting expression of this sentiment was recently lived out by New York Times bestselling author Bruce Feiler. Bruce, who has written books about walking through the Holy Land, was diagnosed in 2008 with having a 7-inch cancerous tumor in his left leg. Among the worries that immediately flooded his mind was the fear that his 3-year old twin daughters would grow up without him, without his voice, his example, and his love. It is every parent's nightmare. As a way to cope with this diagnosis, Bruce called together

six men from various stages of his life and asked them to be a “Council of Dads” for his daughters. He contacted Ben, a friend who’s known him since kindergarten, and Jeff, an old mentor and former camp counselor. He brought in Max, a college roommate and David, his business partner. And they brought their own wishes for the girls, promising to help them dream and hope and live into all life’s questions, especially doing so in case their father would not be with them. In bringing together this council, Bruce was no longer alone; nor did his grappling with the future have to be done from one perspective only. With the help of his family and six wise friends, he could think through the issues weighing down his soul from several angles at once.

In times of grief, inevitably several things swirl around in our heads all at once. We grieve the death of loved ones, the loss of a future tense relationship with those persons, even as we call up past tense memories of time spent with them. We replay final conversations and remember details about what it was like as someone died or left our lives for good. We wonder if we could have done things differently. And we ask ourselves how this mixture of tears, anger, guilt, loss and grief all makes sense in God’s grand scheme of things, sometimes doing so from these very pews.

It is that same swirl of emotions that marks Jeremiah’s words we heard earlier. Of all the prophets, Jeremiah is the most visible in the biblical texts handed down to us. He lived through a period when Judah was finally conquered, when the sacred temple was torn down, and all the leaders of the land were taken away in exile. Jeremiah’s own tears stain the pages of scripture ascribed to him. In the verses I read, we heard Jeremiah’s personal grief as well as he prayed to the heavens on behalf of the suffering people. We heard partial answers that came from the collected wisdom of the society around him, as well as God’s own words of judgment and pain. Anyone expecting a simple answer to feelings of deep grief will never get very far. Grief is a cacophony of voices – our voice, others’ voices, society’s voice and God’s wisdom – all spoken at once. Which is why a common response is for the body and spirit to just shut down, to fall into a depressed state of numbness as if to silence the competing voices once and for all.

But another response is to come to church so in that setting and within a community of faith one can find help for sorting out the different voices. That’s one of the reasons we offer five different worship services here. If a church only offers one answer to people in times of need, it can end up holding them back spiritually as if they were in a bucket of crabs. Have you ever seen a bucket of crabs – where one crab starts to make some progress and climbs up the side, but the other crabs flail around with their pincers and pull it back down to the bottom with all the others? Sometimes you need to sort out the voices and feelings of grief by sitting quietly in a Taizé worship service. Sometimes you need to keep things in perspective by hearing the prayer requests shared by the men from the shelter and our city streets during the Good Samaritan service. Sometimes you need to be in a group where prayer concerns are open and you can look one another in the eyes, like at the Journey worship; or perhaps you need a time of one-on-one prayer with the healing touch of anointing as happens at Holy Ground services or when we serve communion.

Jeremiah was deeply troubled, knowing that God's people had lost their way and were soon about to lose everything they had long cherished. So he spoke personally, saying "My joy is gone, my heart is sick." He spoke as a prophet advocating for the poor in the land, asking "Is the Lord not in Zion?" As God's prophet, he spoke words of judgment, charging "Why have they provoked me to anger with their idolatry?" He offered warnings from the sayings of the people, telling them that "the harvest is past, the summer is ended, yet we are not saved." He cried out for a healing remedy, a balm from Gilead, anything that might restore the people's health. Then he ended with words of grief, how his eyes were fountains of tears because of the sad fate of his beloved people.

A grieving faith is not afraid of the cacophony of voices. A grieving faith takes time to remember that God's experience of loss and pain is simultaneous with our experience of loss and pain. What we ask, God asks. What we long for, God longs for. What we miss and weep about, God misses and weeps about. The mystery of the incarnation, God becoming flesh and dwelling with us in Jesus Christ, is that it was not a one-time event. It was not a divine miracle from 2000 years ago, involving Bethlehem shepherds, Galilean fishermen, lepers from Jericho, Syro-Phoenician widows, and Roman soldiers in Jerusalem assigned to crucifixion duty. No, incarnation is the intimate promise that God is with us always, ever-present, weeping when we weep and rejoicing when we rejoice. The birth of Christ was not a one-time Christmas event we celebrate or ignore. The cross of Christ was not a one-time Good Friday tragedy we remember or dismiss. The resurrection of Christ was not a one-time Easter miracle we can affirm or deny.

We are part of that entire story every moment of our lives, just as God is part of our entire story every moment of our lives. Therefore that is why you cannot grieve alone, nor are you ever alone in your grief. For Jeremiah and the cloud of saints are with you, just as God in Christ is beside you, asking the same questions as you, longing for the same balm for the soul. And as people of faith, as real as the grief is, as tangible as the flow of tears are, the rest of the faith story is also our story as well – this God who would endure a cross for our salvation, this Savior who would conquer death to deliver us lasting hope, and this Spirit that enfolds us in a caring embrace that sorts out the voices, dries our eyes, and picks us up so we can walk toward the future horizon with confidence. It's our own Council of Three-in-One to be beside us in our time of trial.

What brought you here today is probably the wrong question. The right question is this: Who brought you here today? God brought you here. Faith welcomed you here and speaks once more to you. Love is beside you and will hold you in all seasons of your life. Justice is not dead, nor is hope defeated. Hear the good news: With you, O Lord, is life in all its fullness and in your light, we shall see true light.

AMEN