

Westminster Sermon – Emotional Intelligence and the Psalms of Lament

Scripture Readings: Psalm 77:1-10, 11-20

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Today's scripture will focus on a psalm of lament within the Psalter. This book of poems, prayers, and songs has shaped the speech and imagination of synagogue and church since the birth of faith. What is striking is that nearly half of the psalms are songs of lament and poems of complaint. Psalm 77 is a classic example of a lament that moves from complaint towards hope. I will read the first ten verses where the psalmist utters a full voiced lament. Hear now, God's holy word.

*I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that God may hear me.*

*<sup>2</sup> In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.*

*<sup>3</sup> I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints.*

*<sup>4</sup> You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak.*

*<sup>5</sup> I consider the days of old and remember the years of long ago.*

*<sup>6</sup> I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit:*

*<sup>7</sup> "Will the Lord spurn forever and never again be favorable?"*

*<sup>8</sup> Has God's steadfast love ceased forever? Are God's promises at an end for all time?*

*<sup>9</sup> Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has God in anger shut up God's compassion?"*

*<sup>10</sup> And I say, "It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed."*

Beginning at verse 11, the psalmist's mood shifts from lament to hope, a common characteristic in the psalms of lament. It seems when the need and the hurt are fully voiced, something unexpected happens. The countenance of pain and anger moves to a new posture of confidence, well-being, and gratitude. Hear now, the word of God.

*I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD; I will remember your wonders of old.*

*<sup>12</sup> I will meditate on all your work and muse on your mighty deeds.*

*<sup>13</sup> Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God?*

*<sup>14</sup> You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples.*

*<sup>15</sup> With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.*

*<sup>16</sup> When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid;  
the very deep trembled.*

*<sup>17</sup> The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side.*

*<sup>18</sup> The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world;  
the earth trembled and shook.*

*<sup>19</sup> Your way was through the sea, your path through the mighty waters,  
yet your footprints were unseen.*

*<sup>20</sup> You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: Emotional Intelligence and the Psalms of Lament

*The text: I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that God may hear me. Psalm 77:1*

Let us pray: How grateful we are, Holy and loving God, that you honor all our emotions and welcome our prayers of lament as well as our songs of gratitude. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your steadfast and loving presence. Amen.

Two weekends ago Peter and I attended his 40<sup>th</sup> class reunion at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. It is always a privilege to attend these gatherings with Peter; however, this was the first time I returned to Yale since becoming Westminster's 18<sup>th</sup> Pastor. As we strolled through this stunning campus amidst the gothic revival architecture and underneath the tolling bells of the Harkness Carillon, we could not help but ponder about the lives of the Yale Band and our legacy pastor Albert Hale who came to central Illinois almost two hundred years ago to spread the gospel and to set the tone for the emancipation of those enslaved.

Among the seminars we attended was a tour of the Newberry Memorial Organ, with its 12 thousand, six hundred pipes, one of the world's largest symphonic organs, which Dale Rogers had the privilege to play while studying at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music.

Yale's current President, Dr. Peter Salovey, addressed the alumni with an update on the university's commitment to gender and racial equity. As one of the early pioneers and leading researchers in emotional intelligence, Dr. Salovey proposed that people have wide ranging aptitudes with regard to emotional control, reasoning, and perceptivity. In contrast to earlier theories of intelligence which understood emotion as an adversary to reason, Salovey contended that emotion could motivate, enable, and ensure productive outcomes when appropriately identified, understood, and directed.

Another seminar we attended was presented by one of Dr. Salovey's proteges (pro to jays), Professor Mark Brackett, who recently authored the book, *Permission to Feel: The Power of Emotional Intelligence to Achieve Well-Being and Success*. A colorful and dynamic speaker, Dr. Brackett shared stories from his childhood growing up in a home that did not give him permission to feel. When he tried to tell his parents about being bullied, his mother did not want to hear it as it might upset her, and his father told him to toughen up adding that he used to beat up kids like his son. When Dr. Brackett was sexually abused by his neighbor, it's not surprising he was intimidated into secrecy by the perpetrator for several years, suppressing his feelings. His life changed the summer his Uncle Marvin visited with a simple question asked by a caring adult: "How are you feeling, Mark?" Mark broke down, shared his story of abuse, and got the help he needed. Dr. Brackett ended his presentation with gratitude for the Uncle Marvin's in each of our lives.

When he concluded, today's sermon was already beginning to form within me. What better place is there to nurture emotional intelligence than within a faith community. As we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism and covenant to nurture Everard on his faith journey, I am deeply grateful for all the caring adults he will encounter growing up in this church who will give him permission to feel, to ask questions about his faith, and to grow in his understanding of God.

It seems the ancient Hebrews understanding of God, the One whose understanding is unsearchable, is One who honors our feelings and who believes the expression of lament leads to healing. It is not a coincidence that half of the Psalter are laments. As theologian Walter Brueggemann writes in the Foreword of Ann Weem's book *Psalms of Lament*: *In the Psalter we find a recurring disciplined form to the complaints and laments. Israel knew how to order its grief, not only to get that grief fully uttered and delivered but also to be sure that, said in its fullness untamable, it is not turned loose with destructiveness. What we have in these poems is not raw rage, anger, and sadness; rather what we have has already been ordered, mediated, and stylized to make the rage and hurt more effective, available, and usable.*

*The classic model of Israel's speech of grief, pain, and rage has six regular elements: (1) The lament begins with the naming of God in an intimate address. (2) The lament moves immediately to complaint and often engages in childlike hyperbole. (3) The lament addresses God with a large, demanding, unapologetic imperative. "Do something!" (4) The complaint often moves into regressive, disrespectful speech, and, (5) very often the speaker wishes vengeance against the enemy who has caused the hurt.*

*Finally, when the need, the hurt, the demand, and the venom are fully voiced, the mood and tone of the psalm change. Israel's anger and protest appear to be spent and the speaker is, at the end, confident of being heard and so ends in rejoicing and praise. It is not at all clear what happens that permits such a turn. It may be that the long protest is cathartic, and enough said finally suffices. Or it may be, as many scholarly readers think, that there was in the middle of the utterance a communal, liturgical intervention of assurance that permitted a new posture of confidence, well-being, and gratitude.*

To be sure, every psalm of lament is a courageous and daring act of faith, a sign of emotional intelligence, and a permission to feel. As people around the world and many in our country mourn the loss of individual rights, lifting up the psalms of lament is especially timely.

And so, my friends, let us not forget that we have a God whose understanding is unsearchable, a God who not only honors our feelings but who joined us in our humanity to experience the strength of our joys and the depths of our sorrows. Let us hold our feelings in the sacred space of prayer, let us write our own poems of lament, and let us share our songs with close friends, caring adults, and confidants who know and love us. So be it. Amen.