

Ash Wednesday (Feb 14, 2024) Bill Uetricht

A couple of weeks ago at Shirley DeVries' memorial service I started the sermon with a Frank Sinatra song: "Love and marriage, Love and Marriage, go together like a horse and carriage." Shirley loved Sinatra, as do I, and she and Dennis had been linked in a marriage for more than 60 years, embodying the truth that love and marriage can indeed go together. As I started thinking about this sermon and the theme we have identified for Lent, "love and lament," I was taken back to that song. But I haven't been able to come up with the poetry. "Love and lament, love and lament, go together like...I don't know...concrete and cement." It just doesn't have a good ring.

But even if the poetry doesn't work, we should know that what seems like two very disparate realities, love and lament, do belong together, do go together like a horse and carriage, peanut butter and jelly, Batman and Robin, macaroni and cheese.

This seems contrary to what you expect. Love seems so lofty, so good, so positive. And lament seems so petty, so negative. You would think that they were from different universes. But they are not.

It's been a couple of tough weeks for my wife following her knee replacement surgery. Recovery is moving so slowly; the pain has been quite intense. Bev is not a person who runs from lament. She never has been. Something I have noticed, though, is that I am the one who hears most of it. When her friends stop by—and there are many of them, for which we are deeply grateful—she seems to rise to the occasion. And while she will tell them that she isn't very comfortable, she doesn't lament as fully as she does with me.

Deep love often gives people permission to be fully honest, to complain loudly, to register all kinds of grievances, protests, moans, objections. Don't buy the notion that those who criticize this country

don't love it. True love entails lament. Love often makes lament possible. Lament, believe it or not, is sometimes the language of love.

Lament shows up all throughout the Bible. It takes different forms based on the situation of the writer. Today we have a couple of laments that come because of sin, because of bad choices, misdirected trust, love of money and power. Our Psalm for today, probably not written by David, but certainly applicable to him, laments that something has gone really astray, that the author has done something that is despicable. "Have mercy, on me, O God. I've been stupid. And it ain't anybody else's fault."

"Kyrie Eleison," as we say at the beginning of our worship. "Lord, have mercy on me," not simply on your world, but on me personally! Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, my deliberate sins. Cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgression. I know I've blown it. My sin is always in front of me. I can't get away from it. Against you alone, have I sinned. It's not just my neighbors I have hurt. It's you whom I have offended. Have mercy on me!"

Now, I am intrigued by how the Psalmist frames the lament. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions." Why is the writer going to God to ask for mercy? Because he (let's assume it is a he, who is in the likeness of David who stole someone else's wife) knows the love and the mercy that is God's tradition. Love and mercy are what enable lament. The prayer, "Have mercy on me," comes because we know there is mercy in this universe. We lament over ourselves because we are free to do so. Love enables lament. Love enables truth-telling. Love frees us up from the assumption that life is about getting everything right and avoiding the bad. Love frees us to admit that we make serious mistakes. Ash

Wednesday is a day that gives us the freedom to lay it on the line to ourselves and with one another.

Our reading from Isaiah is like our Psalm in its lament about our getting things wrong. In this case, the lamenting has to do with the whole community, and not just with an individual. And also it's different than the Psalm because it comes from God. God is lamenting through the prophet over his people because they don't get love. What they understand is power. What they get is money. And they think that what God wants is religious rituals—fasting.

“Look,” God in Isaiah says, “You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to be violent with one another. And then you ask why the fasting isn't getting God's attention.”

God laments: “Is such the fast I choose, a day to falsely prostrate yourself? Is it to bow down like a wimpy plant and to lie in sackcloth and ashes, to walk around in a way that suggests that you are grieving over things when you really aren't. You fast, and yet you oppress your workers. It's money that matters to you, not justice. I don't want your false humility, your fake religious rituals. This is not the kind of fasting I am looking for.”

Now, by the way, don't see this as dismissing all fasting. We just had a class about fasting that, frankly, was promoting it. It may indeed be a great discipline, especially in a world in which so many of us don't deny ourselves much of anything. It may be worth our while to give up something that we make too much of sometimes. Jesus in Matthew today doesn't say, “Don't fast!” In fact, he says, “When you fast.” The problem isn't fasting, but rather the fasting that misses the point. “Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house?”

Religious rituals that are not accompanied by true love, especially for those who are being hurt by life and injustice, is not what God wants. He laments and his prophets lament when we don't love. Going to church, not eating chocolate or sugar or coconut or beats is a good idea. But don't think that that is what love is truly after. What love wants is love, and love in the public sphere looks like justice. It looks like food for the hungry, welcome to the foreigner, inclusion for the excluded, hope for the children. It looks like an end to the bombing in Gaza. What is happening there now is unjust and immoral. Give up sugar, if you want. But for sure don't give up advocating for the victims of our quests for power, control, and money. Don't fast from lamenting over what is not right in the world.

God's love leads him to lament. If God didn't love, he wouldn't be speaking to his people. He would just give up on them. But his love is so intense that he can't give up on them. He may be angry. But he is not apathetic. God's lament reveals his deep care. Lament, when it is not privileged whining, can reflect our own deep care. We want to be different. We know we are messed up. And we want the world to be different. The world is messed up. If you don't believe that, focus on what the end of Lent will bring you: a crucified Jesus. Because the world is messed up, because the world doesn't trust love, it kills love.

And I say, lament that. Lament that until death turns to life, lament that until the love that runs the universe is trusted by all. "Lament that until justice rolls like a river and all oppression is washed away." Come, O God, and take us, move and shake us. Come now and make us anew, that we might live justly like you."