

Give Us More
Lamentations 1:1-6 & Luke 17:5-10
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How beautiful sits the city that was once full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among nations!... She weeps bitterly at night, with tears on her cheeks...her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress.

These words from Lamentations that we just heard are words of a people mourning the Babylonian exile. The city of Jerusalem still beautiful on a hill, but emptied out of the people who had flourished there, who had lived and loved there, who had been born there and celebrated festivals in its walls. I hear these words and I think, "It's not just Jerusalem and it's not just thousands of years ago." It's now. It's cities all over the world. Memories of better times, safer times, and happier times litter the news stories we hear about places around the world.

How lonely sits Zallingi in West Darfur. How like a widow she has become...her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. The roads to Khartoum mourn for the goats and cows that used to trample its ways. The wells are polluted, houses burned and inhabitants killed. From daughter Zallingi has departed the survivors now living in camps for displaced persons.

How lonely sits the city Baghdad, with recent memories of war, aggression, tyranny, and poverty almost erasing a history of pride. How like a widow she has become...her pursuers have overtaken her in the midst of her distress. The libraries and research centers of the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries forgotten. The debates lay silent. Her people caught in sectarian violence, her young girls' futures uncertain, her mothers mourning, her children who can't remember peaceful times.

How lonely sits the city of New York. How like a widow she has become...She weeps bitterly... Her pursuers have overtaken her in the midst of her distress. The roads of Manhattan mourn for days of affordable housing that have long since passed. The neighborhoods of Brooklyn mourn their changing identities she does not yet understand. The south Bronx coughs for the children whose inhalers accompany them to playgrounds. Her poor, sick, addicted, and homeless have found no shelter for their pain and no relief from their hunger.

Today is World Communion Sunday. I don't bring up these three examples to depress us, although a book called "Lamentations" certainly doesn't sound like it's going to cheer us up. And I don't bring up these three examples in some sort of pining for the past – I am well aware that this is not the first time our world has been plagued by injustice, oppression, violence, and poverty. I bring up these three examples to say that we're all in this together.

Last week the young adults had a movie night at our place and we watched "Blood Diamond." We had a short discussion about it afterwards, but I have to say that most of us were completely emotionally exhausted after watching the movie and needed a break before having the energy to discuss it. It is about the illegal diamond trade taking place during the civil war in Sierra Leone beginning in the 90s. It is violent and graphic and disturbing and infuriating. And it was acted. Rachel said she hoped the movie would move us beyond tears and into action. I remember feeling like there's nothing I can do.

I have to admit, that even though I am a very hopeful person with faith in the goodness of humanity and trust (at least most of the time) in the steadfast love of our God, I sometimes look around me and feel so small. And like I can't make a difference.

And like the world's problems are just too big. How many of you have ever had moments like that? If I were to guess, I would say that we're all in this together, too. Sometimes we have deep doubts about our place in the world and our ability to respond to the call we feel is placed on us to work for justice and peace. I don't bring this up to depress us either – just to let us know that we're all in this together.

I had a friend in college, Ellen, who was in a lot of religion classes with me. We took this great course called “Introduction to Christian Theology and Ethics” that just set us on fire. Each week after class a group of us would go downtown and sit in the back of the local coffee shop with our professor to continue the conversations and debates raised in the classroom. You might say we were just huge nerds, which is true, but we were also dealing with huge questions involving our faith in an academic setting that needed to be sorted out after the academic part of it was over. We had one particular conversation at that coffee shop about doubt that I remember clearly. I said, “Well, I guess you just look at every reason you have to believe and every reason you have not to believe and decide to say, ‘In spite of my doubts, I believe.’” My professor gently corrected me saying, “No, *because* of your doubts you believe.” He, also, believed that doubts are a part of faith and not it's opposite.

Ellen was not sold on this. She said that every week in class she was stunned by the faith of the theologians we read. She listened to the conversations about how people's faith is affected by the course material and was stunned by that, too. Her response to the professor was one of complete honesty and I could hear the pain in her voice, “I want to believe. I want desperately to believe but I can't!” She shared with us how frustrated and angry she gets that she has this huge desire to have faith and feels like she just can't claim

that she has it. She said all she has are doubts and a desire to believe. Our professor said to her, “That desire is the beginning of faith, in fact, that desire is faith. The doubts are just challenging it to continue to grow.” That made sense. To all of us in the room. Even just having that desire was proof that God was active in Ellen and what she was telling was the story of her faith journey, not her lack-of-faith journey.

Faith, however, is not just belief. It is not just sitting around feeling like God is there. That is why the “ethics” part of that course has to be there. The faith we learn about through Christ is an active faith that moves within us and affects us in ways we don’t expect, sometimes can’t name, and feel a pull to respond to. There are often times of deep doubt in this journey of faith. The United Methodist Church teaches that doubts are a part of faith, not its opposite. We question the feeling of belief and the movement in our souls and the name we can’t place and the pull within. We especially question when we can’t feel the pull and aren’t moved in the depth of our being.

I imagine this is what the disciples are feeling when they cry out to Jesus, “Lord, increase our faith!” Jesus has just finished telling them that they will encounter stumbling blocks along their journey to spread the gospel and will be expected to forgive when one of their friends does stumble and asks for forgiveness afterward. I figure that they hear these warnings and are asking Jesus to give them enough faith to avoid the problems he’s highlighted. They’re saying, “Well, if there are going to be stumbling blocks, why don’t you just give us enough faith to leap right over them?” Of course we want more. I get that. Ellen wanted more – she wanted her faith journey to be a story free from doubt. That would certainly be a lot more comfortable, right? But who said that faith is supposed to

be comfortable? Isn't it supposed to be radical? After all, it *is* supposed to help change the world!

Jesus' answer is surprising. "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,'" and it would obey you." A mustard seed is small. Very, very small. And what comes out of a seed isn't that large either. It's a bush. It's not a redwood tree or anything. But it multiplies like crazy. I've heard this analogy before and since I've just come back from Virginia, I feel like it's all the more fitting. We have a vine that grows wild in the southeast that's a lot like mustard – it's spreads like crazy and is uncontrollable. It's called kudzu and if you're ever driving in that area, you'll see some, I can almost guarantee it, covering trees along the sides of the highways. It literally looks like green curtains were draped over all the trees along the side of the road. In other words, a little seed goes a long way. You don't need vast amounts of faith to respond to the call placed in your life – a call to know you are loved by God, who loves everyone the same, a call to work for justice and peace in the name of God. Each Sunday we ask for God's will to be done here just like it's done in heaven. Our call is to help that happen, to play our part by being active participants in our faith. And we don't need vast amounts of faith to be able to do this, we need just enough to be the size of a mustard seed. And if you get a whole lot of mustard seeds together, just think of the difference we can make together!

World Communion Sunday is all about the together part of it. Every Communion Sunday we come to the table and part of what we pray is for God to truly make us one with God, one with each other, and one in ministry to the world. We come to the one table that belongs to God, with the one loaf of bread and the common cup and we sit next

to our Christian brothers & sisters in this congregation as we have a spiritual feast that gives us food for our life and faith journey. Today we recognize and celebrate that this communion table is set up around the world, connecting Christians all over the world as we all pray to be made the one Body of Christ together. Our different parts working together to do the common task of responding to God in a way that reflects God's own self around this planet.

When I hear the words of Lamentations, written so long ago about the city of Jerusalem, I hear its echoes all around. And I am moved. I am moved by my faith that this is not the way it's supposed to be. I am stirred in the depth of my being to know that God didn't create this world to suffer. I hope you feel that, too, that stirring deep inside. I'm not saying to go play Jesus and think we can fix all the world's problems in a single bound. I'm saying let's all do our part, with our little mustard seed of faith and let it grow from there.

Jesus is telling us that one person doing one act of love for this world matters. Jesus is telling us that our faith is calling us to an active relationship with God and with all creation. This morning I'm praying for a stirring in our souls, a little mustard seed of faith to take root and start growing and covering this world with the hope of the kingdom of God made reality.