

Lamentation

Psalm 130; 2 Samuel 1: 1, 17-27; Mark 5: 21-43

In Shakespeare's play "Julius Caesar" Mark Antony speaks of the assassinated leader in that speech which begins: "Friends, Romans, Countrymen--lend me your ears." He goes on to praise what Caesar did when living and to comment on the circumstances of Caesar's death. He urges the Romans to mourn the man whose killers justified their deed by saying that Caesar was ambitious, and does his best to discredit the charge and to question their character. Antony goes on to try to rise to power himself atop the resentment against Caesar's assassins, so that the speech serves him as much as it does Caesar's memory and what we might think of as the objective truth about this particular political murder.

The closest thing in the Bible to this speech is our Old Testament lesson. King Saul and Prince Jonathan have died fighting the Philistines, and David learns of it. David is the presumptive king; he has been, by the scripture's own account, the God-anointed usurper of the throne of Saul, and has been by various means preserving his stature as a leader of men and his life up to this time. Saul's death solves his problem, but David cannot react as though it does. For one thing, he truly was a friend of Jonathan, and he began his career as Saul's servant. The Bible's take on what happened was that it was all Saul's jealousy and paranoia which created the breach, and not David's evident advantages in the eyes of the populace, so David's admiration for Saul in his speech has the more credibility.

The speech of lamentation, and David's assuming the right to require its being learned and repeated, serves David's interests. It also is, like Antony's speech over Caesar, an example of something which we regard as a fit response to someone's death. The eulogy, literally the "good word," is pronounced by some appropriate spokesperson on the part of the deceased and on the part of those who will miss the person who has died.

This morning's scripture readings offer the opportunity to think about ways we respond to death. Most of us are honored by some words spoken over us to a public hoping to do the right thing by our memory, so David's speech is part of our own experience and expectation. The story of Jesus going to heal the sick daughter of a petitioner, and the woman who gets cured on the way, reminds us of two other things. One is the access to healing by the power of God which keeps us from death every time but once; and the other is Christ's mastery over death on behalf of those who become its victims.

David's lamentation, for all its spontaneity, is a traditional formulation. It is customary to sing the praises of those deemed great, to proclaim their importance to everyone, to talk about how good they were at what they did, and how indebted everyone is to them. David hits all these themes in turn, becoming the most personal in his farewell to his friend Jonathan.

Most of these elements are the things we say at funerals and memorials. We credit the person who has died with achievements and acknowledge what we owe, relate how that

person was connected to others and say some personal things about his or her influence. Not every kind of Christianity does this to the same extent and in the same way--some Christian traditions are more formal and less personal than are Methodists and Baptists--but we all have in the Bible a model for focusing and sharing grief through public pronouncement and established observance. Dealing with death that way has its wisdom, and the best way to learn that is to miss the opportunity to go to the formal farewells for someone dear to you. Until then you have little conception of how much such rituals do to integrate your loss and your encounter with mortality with the rest of your life.

Christianity should help a person regard death from a different perspective than the nonbeliever might be expected to have. Hope in resurrection for the deceased and for ourselves, however, is not an alternative to bereavement, but a comfort in it. The scriptures say we are not to mourn as those who have no hope, but that doesn't mean we are not meant to feel the pangs of being sundered, for the rest of our days, from someone whose companionship has enriched our lives. It means we are to know our sorrow as those who hope in what God has accomplished in Christ. We ought to be able to remind ourselves of the promises of scripture and of the life of the person who has died with better courage, and a larger view, than otherwise.

Sometimes Christians speak as though death has been emptied of its power by Christ, but scripture tends to credit death with the grim unanswerability which so often is how we feel it. "The last enemy to be defeated," writes the apostle Paul, "is death." Paul foresees a day, when the creation dissolves into the eternal, when death's pretenses may be mocked: then it is that Christ's follower can say, "where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

In this life that attitude may partly be ours, for all kinds of reasons. If it is not, it is not because we are not believers. It is because death still holds sway, still robs people of one another, still cheats persons of the futures on which they counted. It properly is the occasion for grieving, and that gets us to the story from the gospel.

A father finds Jesus and begs him to come to where his daughter is at the point of death. Jesus goes. Jesus will raise the girl from the dead, restore her to life, restore her to the people who love her, and whom she loves. But that's getting ahead of the story in two ways.

The first thing we need to notice is the woman who, on her own part, with the hope finally of escaping a chronic medical problem, comes to Christ. She has told herself that his healing power is so great that even if she touches the hem of her garment she will be made well. She's right. She gets to Jesus and he feels the power go out as she feels it enter and she knows she is healed. She's presented as another great example of faith.

For the purposes of today's topic she also can represent the healthy, natural and grateful desire to avoid declining health and death. Life is a precious thing, and health is a God-given thing, and it is reasonable to expect God to restore health over and over again. In the narrative the woman consciously goes to Christ to get it from his body, but all of us all our lives look unconsciously to our own bodies for this same resolution and recovery. Bleeding stops of itself, almost always. Infections are fought off, almost always. Whether we take the help of

doctors or not, we heal, almost always. We may have worse scars or less well-formed limbs or lingering problems if we miss the benefit of medicine, but healing is a part of creation. I knew a man years ago who didn't go to doctors. When I took him to the doctor for what turned out to be pneumonia he got sent to the hospital and had some tests done, because his circulation visibly wasn't good--his fingertips were blue. The doctor gave him six months. The hospital discovered that in the five years since he'd last seen a doctor he'd had a heart attack and he'd had a stroke and evidently he'd just kept going. If he had just continued to just keep on going perhaps he would have died in six months, but he was put on a blood pressure pill daily and lived over two more years.

My point is that our avoidance of our own destruction is an instinctive confidence in the merit of life and the providence of God. People who resist accepting the failure of doctors, people who keep hoping for a miracle, may be disappointed, but in some sense they are right. Like the woman in the story, they know that God is about healing, that the life-giving power of the Creator renews over and over. I don't know that too stoic an acceptance of death is a Christian virtue. Jesus himself, at least in one of the gospel traditions, doesn't display it himself. He agonizes, he looks for a way out. He accepts what he believes is God's will and makes it clear that it is not his own will.

On a day when we'll soon see so many small children it seems awful to think about death, and it is awful. The gospel story is about a child who dies, and it's awful. I think there are hopeful and helpful things in the story but I'm glad that the kids, most of them, are in their last VBS session instead of hearing the story.

This is how I want to read the story today: with the little girl being the same person as the woman met along the way, the same woman at two different points in her life. En route to Jesus' goal she's that alternation between ill and well which most of us have along our way, and at the end she's that vulnerable, helpless little person who succumbs, as we are at our end. People are grieving at the house when Jesus gets there, because this little girl has been loved. It doesn't make sense, in human terms, for Jesus to tell them that she's only sleeping.

We don't experience the death of those we love as someone only sleeping. I don't know that we'd laugh if we were told that, but perhaps the laughter in the story is that kind of bitter, incredulous laughter which meets people who seem mad. Making death seem less terrible, less permanent, less unanswerable than it is is mad, from our point of view.

For Christ, it's different. With Christ, it's different. When we get past that part of the funeral service which evokes the person, which is a eulogy, and we look further for meaning, this is the miracle with which we are left. The Christ who wasn't there to keep us from dying comes afterward, and enters the scene where people are heartbroken, and raises us up. Like Lazarus in John's gospel, he bids us rise. Like Mary Magdalene at the scene of his own resurrection, he sees who we are and speaks to us, questioning the finality of mortality which we ourselves are unable to question. After everything, there is life again. Death is not bypassed or deceived, it is overcome, undone, forced to let go. This is the New Testament's experience and its insight into the great matter of life and death.