

**Why We Pray:
The Forgotten Prayers—Praise and Lament
Lamentations 5:1-9, 15-18
Psalm 19:1-5 Rev. Michael D. Kirby
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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Let me start with two stories....that start from the same moment.

It was, to borrow an old and trite phrase, a dark and stormy night. A Sunday about 10 years ago.

At that time, I was the treasurer of the Chicago Gay Men's Chorus and we rehearsed then, as we do now, on Sunday nights. After every rehearsal, I would go over to our bank, just a block from Lake View Presbyterian where we rehearsed and make the deposit of the dues paid that night. On this particular night, the storm had passed, but it was still very dark...no moon, no stars...and the streetlights in the parking lot of the bank were out. As I made my way to make the deposit, weaving among the cars of the chorus members who parked in that lot, I couldn't see the ground and I stepped onto the edge of a large pothole in the parking lot, my foot and ankle slid sideways on the lip of the hole and, as I fell against the hood of one of the cars, I heard a bone snap. It's a feeling that still makes me a little queasy remembering it.

I could not stand on that foot, but I hadn't fallen all the way to the ground. Using the cars for support, I made my way to my own car on the other side of the parking lot...hopping mostly...it was pretty awful.

Falling into my car, I was grateful that it was my left foot. I could still drive. So I decided to drive to the emergency room. But the pain began to blossom, and I recognized what might be the early signs of shock setting in, so I did what anyone would do in that situation....I called my Mother in Houston.

I didn't tell her that I had just broken my foot. Sunday night was our regular call, so I just started driving to Northwestern's ER downtown and trying to have a totally normal conversation with Mom along the way about trivial and everyday things...

That worked for a while....but as I got closer, it truly was hard to keep up the ruse. Finally, I told her what was going on....and the floodgates broke....how

much it hurt, how mad I was that I hadn't seen the hole, how stupid the whole thing was...and what on earth was I going to do with my car when I got to the ER?

Mom didn't say much...she didn't have to...just being there on the line was her most important role in my rant lament.... I made it to the ER....they had valet...and 6 hours later I drove home with cast on my left foot.

Related Story #2

Now...fast forward 8 weeks. My ankle and foot have been isolated in a cast for two months, but it's finally coming off....just in time for me to leave with the chorus for a huge, every 4 years festival in Miami. I get a walking cast the afternoon before I'm leaving for Miami.

And so the first time I ever tried our minimal choreography for one number was in Miami, two days after the cast came off...What we were supposed to do is just shuffle to one side and then go up on our toes for just a second....

Shuffle shuffle...go up on the toes....and I literally tipped to one side, knocking into the person standing next to me...I crashed and burned because I tried to go up on my toes on my left foot that hadn't flexed....hadn't had to carry my weight in a flexed position....and it just decided that was not going to happen.

For lack of use, the muscles had atrophied...and when I needed them, they were not there.

I think you can still find that number that we performed two days later on Youtube....and you can see me sitting on the piano bench with the accompanist. I sang from the bench and then stood up after that number for the rest of the concert.

Why on earth do I tell these two stories at the end of our sermon series on prayer...because they speak to the two prayers I want us to talk about today...prayers of Lament and prayers of Praise....

I call them the forgotten prayers....because they are the prayers most of us pray the least, I think.

Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann has been lamenting the loss of lament in Christian discourse for over 30 years. In a 1986 essay, he talked about how the lack of lament in the canon of personal prayers meant that the covenant relationship between God and each person was not functionally present in times of despair...only in times of gratitude. He went on...

“Where there is lament, the believer is able to take initiative with God and so develop over against God the ego strength that is necessary for responsible faith. But where the capacity to initiate lament is absent, one is left only with praise and doxology. God then is omnipotent, always to be praised. The believer is nothing, and can uncritically praise or accept guilt where life with God does not function properly. The outcome is a ‘False Self’, bad faith which is based in fear and guilt and lived out as resentful or self-deceptive works of righteousness.”

He's talking about the damage of God not being a part of every aspect of our lives, not being a conversation partner...and even one we rail against and lay blame upon when the world is unfair or out of balance.

It's as though when we have those broken foot moments...we have no one to talk to...no one to break down to....to spout about the unfairness or insanity of it all...

We have only the silence of being left to our own devices...where we tend to turn on ourselves...

Lament isn't logical. It sometimes blames God for things where fault can clearly be assigned elsewhere when we are rational....

But that's the point....we aren't always rational...and God seeks to be, needs to be, present in those times where we are in such pain we can hardly think...

The deepest moments of mourning a spouse or a child....the despair of the lost job and the lost sense of self....those moments when everything on the news just seems angry and awful and hopeless....

Lament is both safety valve and 911 call....

It is, for Brueggemann, the beginning of all quests for justice in the church or in our own lives...we must rail against the injustice to someone we believe

cares as the starting point of marshalling our resources, even ourselves, to seek the justice scripture assures us is God's will for all.

So, okay...okay, pastor, this isn't the first time you've made these lament points...we'll go with you on that one...but what about Praise...why does praise really matter?

Does God really need us to sing..."Our God is an awesome God, he reigns"...Does God need us to say..."how majestic is your name in all the earth"?

More than a few comedians go after Christianity on that point...Gosh, if God needs to hear those prayers, God must be awfully insecure...desperate to make heaven great again or something...

But I think those comedians, as funny as their point may be....actually miss the point...

The practice of praising God is an act against fear. Lifting words of adoration to God does not change God...but it can change us. Praise to God is an act of defiance against what we used to call the powers and principalities, those earthly powers that compete with God for sovereignty in our lives....money, success, dominance, winning at all costs. A prayer of praise is a declaration that our destiny is not going to be placed in the hands of Amazon, the Chicago Cubs, my bank account, Donald Trump, or Nancy Pelosi. A prayer of praise is an act of placing our destinies in the hand of the God who created us and everything...the Christ who loves us beyond our capacity to imagine it, and the Spirit who accompanies us every day.

Praise isn't thank you...we talked about gratitude a few weeks ago. Prayers of praise are only prayers of gratitude in that they thank God for being God.

They are one of the ways we remind ourselves who is God—namely God...and who is not God...namely us.

And our capacity to remember that....

Well, it's a lot like my left foot that morning in Miami....if we don't regularly exercise the I'm not God, and God is God muscle....The God has got this muscle....when we do need it....when we need to claim our humility.....when we've gotten too big for our own britches to use my

grandmother's phrase...or when we're are facing a challenge that is just too great to face alone....

We need the spiritual muscle memory of praise...

Most of the time, we are most comfortable with praise in song...in part because it connects with a part of our brain where emotions and thoughts can intertwine together...and logic and arguments are silenced in the face of something deeper and more primal that speaks to our being....

Anne Lamott knows all about that.

In her first Spiritual Memoir..."Traveling Mercies," she speaks eloquently about how music broke her open and created a soft space inside her soul that God went to work on to help her transform her life...

But when she starts talking about the power of praise...she shifts the story... Anne talks about—Ken Nelson—a member of their congregation who was dying of AIDS. "Traveling Mercies" is 20 years old this year...and collects essays from the early 90s.

Ken, she writes, came to their congregation after his partner had died and that empty space left in his heart began to be filled by this loving congregation that welcomed him. Anne specifically remembers one Sunday....when she saw the power of praise transform everyone....

She writes...

"There's a woman in the choir named Ranola who is large and beautiful and jovial and black and as devout as can be, who has been a little standoffish toward Ken. She has always looked at him with confusion, when she looks at him at all....[I think she and others have been afraid that they might somehow catch it]....But Kenny has come to church almost every week for the last year and won almost everyone over. He finally missed a couple of Sundays when he got too weak, and then a month ago he was back, weighing almost no pounds, his face even more lopsided, as if he'd had a stroke. Still, during the prayers of the people, he talked joyously of his life and his decline, of grace and redemption, of how safe and happy he feels these days."

" So on this particular Sunday, [for] the Fellowship Hymn, we were to sing "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." The pianist was playing, and the whole congregation had risen—only Ken remained seated, holding the hymnal in

his lap—and we began to sing, “Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?” And Ranola watched Ken rather skeptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt..., and she went to his side and bent to lift him up—lifted this white rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang confidently together”.... “His eye is on the sparrow...and I know he watches me”...

Maybe what Ann saw is why praise and lament are most often sung...because we need the gift of music to help us get out of our own heads sometimes....a tough thing for rational Presbyterians to hear...get out of our heads and let our humanity....our souls work out this mystery of life together not just with logic, but with love and grace..

Praise and Lament...they are the prayers that remind us who we are and remind us who God is....

They are the multivitamin of faith and the spiritual 911 call....

The Bible is replete with both kinds of prayers because people have always been people....who need to be reminded...

May these prayers that have fed the people of God in times of joy and deepest sorrow continue to feed us...and may we willingly make them a part of our spiritual diet.

To God’s glory and our good....

Amen.