

Sermon: Both/And
Text: Lamentations 3
Date: October 16, 2016
Context: WWPC
Season of Gratitude and Celebration
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The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:22, 23

“Can you guarantee the stranger won’t take any of my stuff?”

This question was not directed at me, but it still startled me. Mainly because I was not expecting it.

I had just hit play on a video of an interview with the wise and wonderful writer and scholar, Parker Palmer. The interview was centered around the practice of hospitality.

Given that hospitality was one of the two focal points of my sermon this week, I was very curious to hear what Parker had to say on this topic.

So I hit play and before I could even sit back in my chair, the producer launched the interview with this question:

“Can you guarantee the stranger won’t take any of my stuff?”

The truth is we’ve probably all asked, or practiced, some version of this question at one time or another.

Fear that a stranger is going to take our stuff. It’s why we lock our cars at night and our houses when we go on vacation. It’s frankly why some people want to lock our country, exclude immigrants, build a wall along our southern border.

Can you guarantee the stranger won't take any of my stuff? The expensive sun glasses I leave in my car. The diamond necklace my mother gave me on my wedding day. The coin collection I started when I was 16, now priceless, to me anyway, and irreplaceable.

My job at the furniture factory. My dignity as a loyal and skilled laborer, a member of the great American working class.

Can you guarantee the stranger won't take any of my stuff?

Parker Palmer did not hesitate to offer his answer. "No, I can't. I can't [guarantee] that."

And that, my friends, is what makes hospitality a spiritual practice, because at heart, hospitality is an act of faith.

This idea, that hospitality is a spiritual discipline, comes as a surprise to many Americans, perhaps even most of us.

We think hospitality is mainly about making our house guests feel welcome and comfortable. It's about putting out fresh towels in the guest room and stocking our refrigerator or pantry with the things they might like and enjoy. Mostly it's about making them feel at home.

Of course these are all kind and gracious gestures in and of themselves. But they do not exhaust the meaning of hospitality.

We know this because the very word itself tells us so. *Hospitality*. Remove the last three letters, the i - t - y, and what do you get? *Hospital*. If hospitals are places of care, compassion and healing, hospitality is the practice of these same things.

It's no accident that religious communities invented hospitals because these same communities have been practicing hospitality for as long as there have been religious communities.

Indeed, the roots of hospitality go much further back than that, to a time well before there were formal religious communities.

In scripture, commentators agree that the first documented instance of hospitality occurs in Genesis, when Abraham and Sarah welcome guests into their tent.

These guests – three men – were not family or old friends visiting from out of town. No, these three travelers were complete strangers.

Abraham has no idea who these visitors are and, you guessed it, there is no way he can guarantee that these strangers won't take his stuff, that they won't make off with his sheep in the middle of the night, or kidnap Sarah when his back is turned.

But despite Abraham's unknowing, despite the risk involved, he welcomes them into his camp anyway. And there it is, hospitality as an act of faith, a spiritual practice.

Hospitality has always been a pillar of desert based religions, and desert-based cultures – Judaism and Islam, Bedouin and Berber. And, yes, even Christianity.

And there's a reason for this.

Because back in the day, back in the heat of the desert, if you didn't welcome the stranger, the stranger might very well die.

And even more to the point, perhaps, that stranger could easily be you someday. You could be herding your animals through unfamiliar territory. You're on your way to water them down in a nearby wadi, only you take a wrong turn and find yourself lost in a trackless desert.

Or a sand storm could blow in during your travels, totally blinding you, and throw you so off course you might wander for weeks without seeing another soul.

And so these ancient faith traditions understood that you could be that stranger, approaching a tented camp, out of food, out of water, out of breath, out of hope.

Which is why hospitality is about more than putting out towels for your guests and offering cookies to their kids, as thoughtful as these gestures are, and why it remains a spiritual practice down to the present day.

Because you could be that immigrant driven from your home country by economic hardship or drug cartels, and forced to flee with only the clothes on your back.

Or your family and your future and your own safety could all be threatened by religious extremists.

They're intent on capturing your city at any cost, on gutting your civilization and jailing all the people like you, people who think and act independently, and turning the clock back on your culture 500 years. And so all that's left for you to do is to run.

I say this because after our service here this morning, we are going to gather in the fellowship hall, and after we enjoy a meal together, a lovely catered meal, we are going to share with you our newly minted ministry plan.

I won't take time now to comment on the process that gave rise to the plan, or to elaborate on its contents.

Expect to say this one thing. The first goal of our new plan, goal *numero uno*, is to improve our congregational care and, yes, our hospitality.

To summarize this latter part, we are going to find better and more effective ways to welcome our visitors and to invite them into our community.

And the reason is simple. Because we recognize that God's welcome, God's arms, as it were, are wider than our own, and because everyone is welcome and included in that embrace. And because we were once welcomed here, when we were strangers looking for a safe place to land.

Now, obviously, we don't need to launch a new program to practice hospitality. We're already practicing it.

When we host coffee hour after worship, and we reach out to someone who is visiting, or when we host pot lucks for incoming students, it's a way of saying we know what it's like to be new and not to know anyone. A way of saying, there are no strangers here at Warren Wilson Presbyterian, just friends who haven't met yet.

So, yes, we are already practicing hospitality. But, there is a larger point in play here, beyond these gracious and welcoming gestures. And it's the reason this is goal number one.

As Parker Palmer noted in that video, something special, something rare and sacred, happens when you create a space for people to come together in safe and hospitable settings.

When we gather with people who are different from us, or with people we do not yet know, we will likely realize just how much we share in common, and in that moment, community is born.

Or we just might discover that our neighbor is living with a kind of pain we simply cannot imagine. And we will come to appreciate why hospitality and hospital share the same root.

Which is exactly what happened to me earlier this week.

Do you remember that old ad, I think it was for Memorex cassette tape, in which a guy was sitting at home in a big lounge chair, parked in front of his stereo system, and when the music started, it just blasted everything backward: his head, his hair, his necktie?

That's kind of how I felt for the first three days of this week.

Along with what I would guess were some six hundred other clergy, mainly white, mainly Presbyterians, I attended the DisGrace conference at Montreat.

Three days of lectures, sermons and workshops, all offered by people of color, all focused specifically on ending the disgrace of racism in our churches, our communities and our country.

Dr. Soong-Chan Rah was the featured speaker on Tuesday morning. He focused his remarks not on the practice of hospitality but on another spiritual discipline: the practice of lament.

He noted that the voice of lament can be hard to hear. It's why we often avoid reading the psalms of lament in scripture, and why there are so few hymns of lament in our hymnals, because lament is angry. And it expresses the kind of pain we normally do our best to avoid.

But we've got to go through it, to give voice to that pain, if we expect to get beyond it. We see that in our text for today:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

This short passage is one of the most hopeful texts in the Bible. Indeed, as the inspiration for *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*, arguably the most beloved hymn of all time, it's famously hopeful.

But remember how it starts:

The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. The verses and chapters that precede those words are even more acutely mournful and angry than these.

Dr. Soong-Chan's point was that, however hard it is to hear these voices, to read and hear these words, we've got to go through the pain to get to the other side.

This point soon became audibly obvious.

Lament, he argued, is what you do when there is a lifeless body in the room. Lament is what you do when you remember the bodies that were crammed into the bottom of those slave ships, or the lifeless bodies that were casually tossed overboard to the waiting sharks.

Lament is what you do when you call to mind the bodies that were sold upon their arrival in this country, then promptly brutalized by their masters.

Or the female bodies, in particular, that were assaulted and violated by the white men that believed they somehow "owned" those bodies.

Lament is what you do when you remember the bodies hanging from the end of those ropes throughout the south, not slaves but American citizens, while white folks looked on like they were at a county fair.

Or the bodies of black men and boys, lying bleeding and, then, lifeless on America's streets today.

That's what lament looks and sounds like.

It was a litany I will never forget, partly because it peeled the varnish back on my own soul. But also because toward the end of it, one woman, presumably African American, simply couldn't bear it any longer.

She let out a howl of grief, giving voice publicly to decades of pain that had seeped into her soul, pain that steadily accrued as she learned these stories about her forbears, and lived these stories *for herself*.

It was a cry of dereliction, a lament for herself and for her people. And we all heard it, even us white folks, because it was impossible not to, and we all wanted to wail and cry with her, because it was impossible not to.

And then something beautiful happened. Because Anderson Auditorium was filled with pastors, three other women immediately got out of their seats and went to comfort this grieving woman, and they stayed with her, surrounding her in a little circle of love, as she continued to weep and lament.

Of course this spontaneous act of love and compassion was a gesture anyone might make, anyone with a heart, a soul, a conscience, clergy or not. And it reminded me of the first half of our goal, to improve our congregational care.

Because congregation care is what hospitality looks like when it faces inward.

These are not separate things – congregational care and hospitality – but one thing, not either/or but both/and, one practice that faces outward, and one that faces inward.

Hospitality is what we practice when strangers come into our midst, because we all know that we could have taken a wrong turn at one of life's junctures and ended up disoriented and off track, in need of a safe place to land.

Congregational care is what we do for our own members, when one of us takes a wrong turn in life, or when life itself spins us around, and we end up lost and out of food, out of water, out of breath, out of hope.

Congregational care is what we do when there's a body in the room, a literal, living body and it belongs to a member of our church family and we want to reach out and let that person know that these arms I am wrapping around you, these aren't just my arms, these are God's arms, these are the arms of the body of Christ.

And I'm wrapping them around you because God first loved me and God loves you and I love you, too, because that is just the way it is and that is just what we do around here.

Today we launch a season of gratitude and celebration. As we prepare to live into a bright and hopeful future, as we get set to meet its challenges and rise to embrace its opportunities, we first want to take time to reflect on, and give thanks for, the gifts we've been given and the blessings we enjoy.

I'm mindful that we're launching this season during a time of acute unrest and high anxiety in the life of our country, and that much of this unrest and anxiety is driven by racial tensions that are breaking out in cities and towns from coast to coast.

So I am grateful to be a minister in the Presbyterian Church USA, and the pastor of this particular congregation. Because we are all part of a faith tradition, a faith family, that doesn't shy away from lament, one that is committed to building a more welcoming and hospitable church, more welcoming and hospitable communities, a more welcoming and hospitable country.

I am grateful to be part of a local church community that understands that congregational care is what hospitality looks like when it is focused on our own members, our beloved friends and neighbors who might be hurting or lonely.

I am grateful that I am part, that we are all part, of a faith tradition built on a foundational belief that God welcomes strangers, including me and you.

One that is rooted in the truth that God's love never ceases, that God's mercies never come to an end, and that God's faithfulness is great to all generations.

Thanks be to God!