

# ***Caring for One Another***

## ***Can I Say that to God? –***

### ***Lament as an Act of Faith***



#### ***Opening Questions*** (select 1 or 2 questions)

- What are the qualities you value in a friend?
- What is something you are grateful for today?
- What is a comfort food that you enjoy at the end of a tough day?

#### ***What Does the Bible Say?***

*Psalm 25:1-7, 16-18*

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust;

do not let me be put to shame;

do not let my enemies exult over me.

Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;

let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Make me to know your ways, O LORD;

teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,

for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,

for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember me,

for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

Turn to me and be gracious to me,

for I am lonely and afflicted.

Relieve the troubles of my heart,

and bring me out of my distress.

Consider my affliction and my trouble,

and forgive all my sins.

**Think About...** (optional, depending on time)

- What word or phrase from the psalm speaks to you today? Is there something from that word or phrase that you would like to carry into your day or week?

### **What Do Others Say?**

Civil war general Ulysses S. Grant once said, "*The friend in my adversity I shall always cherish most. I can better trust those who helped to relieve the gloom of my dark hours than those who are so ready to enjoy with me the sunshine of my prosperity.*" That is one way of saying, when we face the hard stuff of life with someone, that relationship grows stronger.

Sadly, many of us, in our seasons of adversity and challenge, feel alone and isolated. It's so tempting when we are facing the hard stuff of life to try to rely on our own strength, to try to carry the burden on our own. Sometimes we want to protect those we love from what we are facing. Sometimes we are afraid of saying it out loud or facing the truth of it.

It doesn't have to be that way. God created us to be in relationship--with others *and* with God. We are created to share our joys *and* our sorrows with one another and with God. We hunger for that deeper connection, but we also worry "Can I really say that out loud? Can I say that to God?"

In the Christian faith there is a tradition called "lament." Lament is the practice of laying before God all the feelings that we experience whether it is sadness, loneliness, loss, grief, our doubt, or our accusations of something being unfair or unjust. Lament creates space for questions that ask God, "Why?" or "How long?" or "Are you there?" Lament shows us that nothing is off limits in our relationship with God. God's faithful, enduring, and unconditional love make it possible for us to lament without fear of damaging our relationship with God. Jesus modeled this for us from the cross when he cried out, quoting Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (MT 27:46)

Lament is, at its core, an act of faith and trust. Lament is a gift for those times when the challenges of life overwhelm us. It is an invitation to lay our deepest and truest feelings, worries, and confession before God. It is a practice that can, over time, draw us into deeper relationship with God. There are many examples of lament in the Bible, including Psalm 25.

Psalm 25 is a plea from the depths of a suffering soul, a cry of desperation to the God in whom the speaker trusts for deliverance and mercy. It expresses our longing for God not only to deliver us from our troubles, but also for God to see us fully. It begins with an affirmation of trust: *To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust. Do not let me be put to shame.* Then the speaker seeks guidance and instruction: *Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.* We hear pain

and a longing for life to be different and we hear the speaker acknowledging the truth of who God is.

Then comes this powerful moment: *Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord and your steadfast love... Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me.* Basically, the speaker is saying, "God, remember who you are and remember who I am, and forget the sin that stands between us. Remember me, separately from what I have done or left undone." This is a gutsy move--bold and audacious--and one that gives us permission to lay all our own burdens and suffering on the table before God.

I know firsthand that this is hard. When I was in the midst of my own cancer journey, there were so many days when I would want to sit down and read my devotional or the Bible or pray or just sit quietly in God's presence and I couldn't. It was just too hard. I felt too vulnerable. I would light the candle and sit in my usual cozy spot and I would be overwhelmed by the uncertainty, the isolation, the fear that this stupid journey would go on forever and I would never feel like myself again. So I would get up and blow out the candle. And I would try again a few days later.

Eventually, at the suggestion of a friend, I started writing in the morning. I put pen to paper and let the thoughts flow uncensored. I laid it all on the table. Nothing was off limits. It became its own kind of prayer. Over time I began to notice that as I wrote different thoughts would pop into my head. I heard "I love you" and "you are not alone." God's word for me in the dark place. Words that made it possible for healing to begin in a new way. Words that I'm not sure I would have been able to hear if I hadn't first released all that I was feeling--the good, the bad, and the ugly--to God.

We can say anything, confess anything, lay it all on the table before God without fear because we have God's promise that nothing can separate us from God's love. Through Jesus' living and teaching and dying and rising again from the dead, we see to what lengths God is willing to go to be in a living relationship with each and every one of us. There is nothing we can say, nothing we can confess, nothing that we can lay on the table before God that will cause God to back away from us or let us go. Anything you could possibly lay on the table, God can handle. When we are real with God, when we lay it all on the table--which even in our doubt and uncertainty is a complete act of trust--when we do that our connection with God grows stronger and the relationship grows deeper.

—Reflection written by Jeanne Hartfield

**Think About...** (select one or more questions)

- What is the difference between complaining and lament?
- When you've had a time of difficulty or lament, what have you longed for or needed from those around you?

- When have you had a relationship grow stronger through adversity? What about that experience brought you closer with the other person?
- Can you think of a time when someone really listened to you? What did they do that told you they were listening?
- When you are listening to someone who is sharing a difficult story, how do you typically respond? What are some helpful ways to respond? In what way do you want to carry their story with you? How can you turn their concerns over to God?
- Growing up, were there any topics of conversation that were off limits in your family or circle of friends? If so, how has that impacted how you talk about them (or not) now?

### **Prayer**

To you, O Lord, we lift up our souls. In you, O God, we place our trust. You are our refuge and strength. Turn to us and be gracious to us. Relieve the troubles of our hearts, bring us out of our distress, and lead us into abundant life. Amen.

### **Connecting Faith with Daily Life...** *(for individual reflection & action)*

- Identify someone who has been with you or supported you in a difficult season. Write them a thank you note (or send an email or text message).
- Think about a burden you or someone you love currently carries. Through writing or in prayer, lay it on the table so that Jesus might share it with you.
- Read and reflect on some of the other Psalms of Lament such as Psalm 13; Psalm 22; Psalm 42; Psalm 69:1-18, 29-36; Psalm 80; Psalm 85; or Psalm 88. Notice some of these are individual laments and some are from the perspective of the community.
- What is something from this reflection and discussion that you want to remember?

© 2019 Incarnation Lutheran Church. All rights reserved. Scripture texts are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States. *The Lutheran Prayer of Good Courage* is used by permission. OneLicense #A-703970.

*This devotion is part of the Caring Community initiative of Incarnation's strategic plan.*