

“*Ku’u Maka I Kumu Waimaka/My Eyes a Fountain of Tears*” September 18, 2016
Jeremiah 8: 18- 9: 1 1 Timothy 2: 1-7

I’ve known people over the years, as have you, who reflect on their grief, saying, “I don’t think I have any tears left.” And yet, more come—so long as one is properly hydrated; those in grief are sometimes not, as self-care is neglected often.

Western society, with its ideas about sophistication, doesn’t do well with grief. Many want to ignore or deny it, rushing on to the next opportunity for stimulation, including relationships. Not everyone, however. Some of us are able to sit on the “ash heap,” as in the story of Job and participate in the work of mourning. And it is work; grief takes energy. Years ago, in a class on Hawaiian history at UH Manoa, we read about an ancient ali’i who showed her grief by having her tongue tattooed. A familiar story, perhaps; possibly a common ritual? It demonstrates a willingness to engage more pain in honoring the loss, as both physical and psychic distress combine.

For those who were reading the Scripture passages for today ahead of time, and I know most of you did, you noted that the gospel reading is one of those which baffles our modern minds. Jesus seems to be encouraging cheating in business practices. It is a rare thing to see that in our time, never mind that Wells Fargo was just fined millions of dollars for such antics, as you’ve read in the news; over a thousand employees were fired, while the executive in charge got a huge bonus... This parable is one in which we recognize our inability to “get” the point from our perspective far removed from the Ancient Near East in general and ancient Palestine in particular.

The passage from Timothy has the author encouraging prayers for everyone, especially those in authority. What a thought! Like me, you’ve probably been much more willing to pray for President Obama than some who came before him. The message here is to leave the judgment to God by praying with open hearts. Who knows, *paha*/perhaps those intentions work to inspire our leaders to endeavor more for the common good than previously observed. That is always the trust behind prayer, that something changes—especially within us. True prayer is an honest expression of trust, freely released, without condition.

Toward the end of the Timothy reading, we note the author’s entreaty, “I am not lying.” A curious statement. When someone wants to convince you of something and pulls out the “I’m telling the truth” statement, we often are suspicious.

However, this author, writing in the name of Paul but actually someone else, is doing everything possible to make an important point. That we can respect.

Then there is Jeremiah... The prophet writes before and during the Exile in Babylon, the great stress experienced by the Judeans/Jews, and the means of their transformation as a faith community alienated from their sacred spaces. And, as I've noted, Jeremiah is the contrary voice, the one at odds with the court prophets who are more loyal to the sovereign, and their livelihoods, than to God. The prophet voices divine distress over the pain of the people. This lament is so central to his recorded work that John Bright's commentary depicts it on the cover by way of a simple drawing. While we Protestants often, wrongly, characterize the God of the Hebrew Scriptures as one of violence (and there are instances of that), there are many instances in which God's compassion and voluntary suffering are noted. This is such a moment.

In chapter 8: 18 through chapter 9: 1, we read,

My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" ("Why have they provoked me with images, with their foreign idols?") "The harvest is past and the summer is ended, and we are not saved." For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead?/A'ole anei he nini ma Gileada? Is there no physician there?/A'ole anei he kahuna lapa'au malaila? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears/a me ku'u mau maka ho'i i kumu waimaka, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!

Ho'eha'eha i ka na'au heartbreaking, yea, this realization that suffering has no remedy. There is no "balm;" there is no physician. And Gilead, in Northwest Jordan, a common place name in the Hebrew Scriptures, is on the pathway to Babylon. Exile awaits; there are no Care Packages, no Doctors without Borders.

Consider your own experience of exile, whether due to death, unemployment, divorce, relocation, alienation, illness, any significant interruption in daily life and self-understanding...

Grief and frustration and despair often take us into exile, a strange sojourn. Here we think of those ancestors who suffered through imported diseases, weapons, lifestyles, and morality. In more cultures than any one of us can name, oppression,

even genocide have been the cause of our Creator's tears. In recent months we've heard about assaults upon Standing Rock Sioux North Dakota tribal lands and, thereby those populations, by outsiders with attack dogs, desiring water, minerals, oil, and other resources. So, too, in the Philippines where extrajudicial killings of farmers and activists who get in the way of profit have become common. One can only wonder what awaits our friends in Cuba once US interests are free to "invade" once again.

So, here we are, in a sea of tears, our boats rocking. Then Jesus shows up and reminds us of the mandate to justice. Then we take the work of Jesus seriously, as Toyohiko Kagawa once noted, "I read in a book that a man called Christ went about doing good. It is very disconcerting to me that I am so easily satisfied with just going about." Then we get busy with small, hopeful acts in an effort to make a difference and things begin to change. Dan West started Heifer International with a great idea and a heifer named Faith, donated by a farmer in Indiana; Jimmy Carter builds house after house with Habitat for Humanity and inspires us through the Theology of the Hammer; Kathy, Linda, Elle and others decide to form a coalition on homeless issues...and sometime soon, as our African American preachers say, "How long? Not long," someplace, here paha/perhaps, someplace, tears of happiness result. May those tears fall for a long time. How long? Forever.