

Extra Shot: Need for Lament | Katie Harmon-McLaughlin

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Robin Linkhart, Katie Harmon-McLaughlin

Robin Linkhart 00:32

Hello and welcome to Project Zion Podcast. This is your host Robin Linkhart, and I'm here with Katie Harmon-McLaughlin, Community of Christ Director of Formation Ministries. Today we are talking about the importance of lament, as we journey in faith as individuals and as a community. Hey, Katie, thanks so much for being with us today on Project Zion Podcast.

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 00:58

Hi, Robin, thanks for having me.

Robin Linkhart 01:01

Sure thing. So at the front end, we really like to have our guests just take a moment to introduce themselves. So can you tell our listeners a little bit about you?

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 01:14

Sure, as you mentioned, I have the opportunity to work for Community of Christ as the Director of Formation Ministries, which is a job that I really love. I also am the mother of two young daughters, an almost two-year-old and a six-year-old. And I live just about a couple of blocks away from the Temple in Independence, Missouri. So I am right in the neighborhood, and it's a very exciting place to be.

Robin Linkhart 01:45

Thanks, Katie. I recently read something Sophia Kiguta-Kiarie wrote saying that, "Lament is a prayer, a cry out to God, that takes us from a place of pain to one of hope and praise. It provides the physical, emotional, and spiritual space to take off the masks we wear daily, and gives permission for our souls to freely express all that we are thinking and feeling. It is a unique place where the frailty of our human condition meets the limitless comfort of our Savior." For me, and many others, the Community of Christ's announcement on March 5, sharing about the recent sale of significant historic sites of the Restoration brought deep feelings of loss to many of us, even as we also recognize the new possibilities and hope this action brings with it. If ever there was a time to create spiritual space, and give permission to take off our everyday masks, and freely share what we are thinking and feeling, I think this is such a time. Katie, what is lament, how did you learn about it? And why is this practice so important to us as we seek to follow Jesus the peaceful One?

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 03:20

Thanks, Robin. First, I want to say that I don't know that I could offer a better definition of lament than the quote that you just read. I think that's such a powerful expression of that invitation to take off our masks to give ourselves permission to freely express all that we are thinking and feeling. But I will also say that I think the act of having this conversation is part of what makes lament so important and powerful. It is an honest naming. The ability to speak clearly with one another, those areas of loss and grief that we are experiencing, individually or communally in very practical terms. And so today we are thinking in particular about this announcement, and the spectrum of feelings that many people might be experiencing right now and especially holding space for the depth of loss that many might feel. And so I would say that lament is that honest naming and feeling of what is most real in us with and to God. It is an act of trust, that God is indeed present with us and the exact circumstances we are in and that we can be completely real with God to share whatever we are feeling. I see (lament) as a healthy expression, individually and communally of grief, sadness, rage, confusion, uncertainty, that takes us to exactly the place where we are feeling it but can also have the potential of being creative and deliberative, and open us to the possibilities of God's action, where and how we are. I have learned about Lent, through—sorry lament. Lent is one of the places where I've learned about lament. But I have learned about limit from many sources, including scripture. The Psalms have powerful expressions of lament. Even Jesus on the cross asks the powerful question of, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Lament has also been a part of my own journey, a way of processing the pain of deconstruction again and again. Lament has—is something that I have offered as I've experienced loss in my own life and in the communities that I am part of. And I think that, as we look around us at our global community, in the midst of many of the things that are occurring right now lament is an appropriate response, to offer our rage our sadness, our grief our confusion into the presence of our God who was with us and all things. And the final part of your question was, what does this have to do with Jesus the peaceful One? And for me, to follow Jesus the peaceful One, we have to be willing to see where Jesus is leading. And I believe that Jesus invites us into the places of people's lives where there is both tremendous beauty and tremendous brokenness. Where we hold all the realities in the fullness of our loss and grief and joy and potential. And so to follow Jesus is to experience the fullness of our humanity, of our human experience, which takes us to times such as this. And so I believe that lament is a faithful response to whatever it is that we are feeling.

Robin Linkhart 07:33

Wow, you said so many things that just popped out and touched me deeply. And as you're talking, Katie, I'm realizing that this spiritual practice is really, really important for us, no matter what's going on, including times like this, where it can just be a shocking sense of information, and loss. But so many stages and phases of faith journey can bring us to times of loss. I was struck by you talking about deconstruction, and reconstruction, those theological developments in our life and so many of us that go through that, including spiritual seekers who find God maybe for the first time, or are finding God again—again, for the first time, you know, meeting Jesus again for the first time, and there's so much deconstruction and reconstruction. Thank you for really fleshing that out and making it so relevant to so many dimensions of our lives. What are the challenges or barriers to investing time in lament? I mean, why might it be difficult for us to wholeheartedly engage like bringing our real selves and real feelings into this practice?

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 08:56

That's a great question. And I think lament can be daunting because it does invite our realness. I think in general, we tend to avoid or evade invitations to be our truest real selves. It's one of those kind of core paradoxes of the spiritual life, that we both yearn for the ability to be completely free and truly who we are. And yet there is always something about that invitation that is, is still a little bit daunting and terrifying that we resist. And so I think because lament is a taking your masks off kind of moment, of being really true and honest about what you're feeling kind of moment. It requires a level of vulnerability. I think, also that many of us come from cultures that resist in general the dark emotions that we might experience and assume that faithfulness means optimism or idealism. And we don't want to linger too long in the negative stuff that keeps us down. I have found that the darker emotions can actually be a powerful pathway to transformation with God. And that when we allow ourselves to just fully feel whatever we are feeling, we're able to process and integrate those feelings much more effectively than if we sweep them under the rug and let them fester for years without ever addressing them. And so some authors actually suggest that lament in a community is a sign of communal spiritual health, because it indicates that there's a level of openness, vulnerability, trust, willingness to be real, and the ability to be reflective and address realities as they are occurring with one another and love rather than not talk about it or avoid it for fear of what could occur.

Robin Linkhart 11:16

Wow, that's—I'm listening to you. And that just feels so so true. What does lament look like as an individual practice and also as a community practice? I mean, some of us like myself really have no formal training or education about lament, or even what the practice looks like individually, much less community wise.

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 11:44

Yeah, I think lament can take as many forms as there are ways of praying. So lament can be those wordless groans of our heart, just being present in the silence and letting ourselves truly feel the depth of what we are feeling and hold that without words before God. Lament can also come in the form of written or verbal prayers, where we are articulating exactly what it is that we are feeling. And that we have that sense of trust and safety in our relationships with God or each other, to be able to express that. There are lots of different offerings of communal rituals of Lent, some time—lament, I keep saying lent—lament. Sometimes connecting lament to sacrament can be really powerful. I know that in Community of Christ tradition, when we approach the table for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, there's always an opportunity to pay attention to need of reconciliation, in our own lives, and in our relationships, which is inherently an opportunity to notice what might be broken. Where there might be suffering or struggle within us and within our community and to be able to name and uphold that. And that's not something that we naturally do. But there are rituals for lament and for an offering of reconciliation and reconnection that are offered even to the very fabric of the traditions that we hold dear as a sacred community. I do think that when we think of lament written expressions are often some of the most common that come to mind. And so if it's okay, I'd like to share a couple examples. And these come from a book that I would recommend, by Jaco J. Hammon called *When Steeples Cry: Leading Congregations Through Loss and Change*. And these are just some examples of what liturgies of lament might look like. And so he starts with a scripture from Lamentations 3:17, 22-23. "My soul is

bereft of peace, I have forgotten what happiness is, but this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning." And so in this expression of lament, as he goes, and I'll share just a couple of his examples. He follows this pattern of expressing the depth of feeling, and then turning toward hope, just like is modeled in that scripture from lamentations. So here's an example. "Oh God, we have seen our membership, our identity and our neighborhood changing. Even as we bow down low, we do not know who we are. Turn our minds toward you, and grant us grace to remember, your steadfast love. We call on your name, O Lord, from the depths of our sorrow and uncertainty. We long to hear your voice. Turn your face toward us, that we might live in the light of your steadfast love." So those are two examples, and he has many throughout this book, of being able to name communally what we are experiencing and feeling. And to do that in the context of our faith, and to hold that together, even as we are turning ourselves toward God or inviting God to turn toward us, when we don't feel like we're able to turn toward God yet.

Robin Linkhart 16:01

That sounds like a great resource, Katie, the Jaco J. Hammond book and the quotes that you just read, what other resources might you recommend for us?

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 16:14

Another book that I have found really helpful, this is more on grief work. But I think that's an important part of lament is by Francis Weller. And it's called *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal in the Sacred Work of Grief*. And this is another really helpful resource, because he's also reclaiming the power of grief and the dark emotions as important opportunities for us to continue to discover who we really are, what really matters to us. What it is that we most desire, out of life and community. Even though these experiences can be uncomfortable, unsettling and even painful, they can also be incredibly revelatory. And as we think about our own histories, you know, some of the most difficult moments of loss in our lives, also led to deeper awareness about who we really are, and what truly matters in our lives. And those are powerful places where the Holy Spirit is meeting us and guiding us and continuing to form us in exactly the places we find ourselves.

Robin Linkhart 17:31

So in light of something you've already mentioned, in our culture, for sure, and others as well, we tend to avoid or even not want to look at the dark side of life, the painful grief, avoid death and illness and dying, I mean, just things that make us feel uncomfortable. And as I'm hearing you really flesh out, lament and what it is, and what it means in our lives, it feels like, especially when you said "claim the power of grief". So grief and loss and pain, that we in effect are shutting ourselves off from a pathway of realizing God's presence in our lives in more powerful and transforming ways and, and in healing ways. I mean, we are actually closing ourselves off to a pathway of healing for ourself and our community.

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 18:35

Absolutely, yeah, I think that's a really important thing to highlight that it can—nobody really wants to sit in what is uncomfortable? I don't. You know, I think that it's natural that we really want a way out. And even even we look at our biblical ancestors, the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years complaining, like, what are we going to get out of here. And so trying to bypass or avoid, the discomfort

is a very natural human response. And I have a lot of empathy for that, because I have also tried to find tactics of evasion in those moments for myself. But yeah, when we're able to really just slow down and be present and hold what we are for what it is, then those can be powerful places of healing for us, individually and in community.

Robin Linkhart 19:32

Yeah, and there's something about levels of this vulnerability. So for me, it's totally different if I'm going to have the courage or the stick to it, with capacity to look at that in my own personal life, but then to think about doing that with others in in community can feel very threatening and yet as you speak, it sounds like they are both really, really important and in some way they feel connected to one another, both the individual and the community. Katie, you've named several things in today's world that connect with the need to lament. And I'm wondering if there might be other things in our journey as a people of faith that might connect with the need to lament?

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 20:21

Absolutely, I think we are no strangers to the feeling of loss, even over the last five years living through a global pandemic, and experiencing not only all of the painful losses of that as part of our global community, but recognizing loss of familiar forms in our own congregation, congregations and sacred communities. Losses of sacred spaces, in their many forms, whether that's a beloved congregational building, that was a place that we experienced many significant life events, and Sacraments, and were formed in faith, to loss of rituals or traditions or ways of doing things that have been important to us in the past. One of the quotes that I really resonate with in this Hammon book is, "The only life that a gospel community knows is one of transition, which implies the experience of loss." I think there's something really important to acknowledge that as a community following Jesus, the peaceful One. In some ways, we are always on the move, we are constantly living in transition, even though we're feeling that acutely right now, in many places, particularly throughout the western world. There's a sense of, of decline. There's a feeling at times, like no matter how hard we try, it's just not good enough. We feel that sense of loss in every part of our beings and hearts and souls and bodies and minds. A yearning to return to a time where things maybe felt for some of us more stable or predictable. Times of loss and transition have become our new normal in many ways. And as communities, have we taken the time to process to grieve, to offer our laments vulnerably, and honestly with one another to create pathways for individual and communal healing and to be open to the new thing that God is doing in with and through us during these times of significant change. The rest of the quote that I just started, says, "However, the ever present nature of mourning need not dissuade you, as the leader in your congregation from doing the work of mourning. Inherent, to the work of mourning is the promise of new life, even if it is a life that will include mourning. For gospel communities grieving is life giving and life affirming. Conscious mourning has a dynamous power, that can bring forth new ways of being a gospel community." And so I think that when we come to moments like this, where the loss feels so shocking, so large, so all encompassing for our whole community, it can also be an important moment to assess where we are, to notice all those unnamed losses all along the way that we have been carrying, and to hold and to express in our lament the full reality of this time of change and transition that we have been finding ourselves in and to trust that God is with us here, too.

Robin Linkhart 24:03

So Katie, we're at a really significant point in our journey together as a people of faith in Community of Christ. And, and facing a lot of really deep feelings about the recent announcement and of course, a sense of loss and uncertainty for the future. Will there be community gatherings focused on lament or if we want to provide a lament service in our area, are evangelist equipped to assist us? What can we be looking for in the days ahead?

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 24:40

Yeah, thanks, Robin. So there will be an offering on Monday, March 11, at 12pm Central Time and 7pm Central time for people who want to come together and just be together in community. It'll be on Zoom, so we'll be able to see each other's faces and hold one another a sacred community, as we process the spectrum of responses that people may be having, in response to this really big news for our community. The hope is that, after that experience, we'll be able to record some portions of it to potentially share as a foundation for the field. And so that might provide a model if there are pieces that, that congregations want to replicate, to continue doing some of that processing work together. I will also just say that I think that when we are holding each other in these kinds of experiences, rituals can be very powerful, and so can our presence together. And so certainly reaching out to evangelists, to listen, to be present, to be companions to the community would be a wonderful way to utilize the gifts of that priesthood office. But also, all of us, you know, have the ability to just be present to each other in this time to have a softer, more grace filled gaze toward each other as we recognize that we might be processing our our grief, or shock or joy in many different ways and have many different responses. But we're held together in the unity of the Spirit, in the midst of whatever it is that's occurring, and whatever we're feeling.

Robin Linkhart 26:36

Katie, are there any other things that we need to think about today, as we learn more about lament?

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 26:49

I think the one thing that I would offer is that sometimes it can feel hard to prioritize our lament amid the many difficult things that are occurring in our lives in the world. And some might ask, why are you processing grief about this one thing, when there are so many other things occurring, that also require the depth of our feeling and response. And I think it's important to acknowledge that we are capable of holding multiple things at once within ourselves, and that we hold this news, the difficulty of this news and our feelings about this news into the rest of all of the difficult things that are occurring in our own lives. And in our world. I'm sure that people who are listening right now could name their own, their own prayer concerns that are on their hearts, for their family, for their friends, for their communities, for their own lives, and yearnings and losses that they are experiencing personally, as well as our recognition of the many challenging things occurring around the world. And so I want to say that, I believe it is valid, to feel the depth of feeling about this particular decision, to hold it together, to name it in a healthy way. And it's also valid to hold it into the larger reality of all that God invites us to see and hold and love and feel, to be a blessing to our world. So I guess for me, maybe, maybe for others, too, I'm just acknowledging where grief lies, and how we can feel many things at one time, and how it's okay to feel the loss of this and also to feel the loss of other things too.

Robin Linkhart 28:54

Katie, do you have any last words you'd like to share with our listeners today?

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 29:00

Just gratitude, to have the opportunity to talk about something that is so vulnerable for us. And grateful for the willingness of Community of Christ, to name out loud those things that are hard, so that we can hold and process them together in love. That, to me feels like a faithful and real spiritual community that I am deeply grateful to be a part of, wherever the Spirit leads us next.

Robin Linkhart 29:33

Well, thank you so much for being with us today. Katie, we really appreciate everything you have brought to us and I encourage all of us to find the courage to honestly name the feelings in reality in practical terms for us together, alone, and with God, What a powerful practice. And of course of very special thanks to all our listeners. If you would like to hear more about this new chapter in Community of Christ's story, look for links in the show notes today. Also look for links to more information about Katie and things that she offers on Project Zion Podcast including the inaugural series of 10 Awaken to God's Presence episodes released early in the COVID pandemic. This is your host Robin Linkhart. And you are listening to Project Zion Podcast. Go out and make the world a better place. Take good care, bye bye.