

“It’s OK to Cry (Out)”
 Vince Amlin
 United Church of Gainesville
 July 11, 2010

This morning we begin with a little music theory- very little, since I dropped out of music school after one year. Most Western music depends on progressions of chords which create and relieve tension in the listener. Mark, would you demonstrate for us?

<Mark plays>

Can you feel the tension there?

<Sing the progression, emphasizing tension.>

It is inherent even in our scale. In the 8-note octave, the 7th note is called the “leading tone” because it leads to the eighth note, the octave. It begs to move up one half step and be resolved. Listen.

<Sing a scale in solfege, stopping on “ti” (DO-RE-MI-FA-SO-LA-TI)>

Sing the next note. Can you hear that it wants to move to “do?” Musicians have lots of fun with our need for resolution, playing with the tension that different sounds create for our ears and either giving or withholding the satisfaction which our ears seek. It can be rather uncomfortable, even emotionally draining, to listen to a piece of music which refuses to resolve. Each time you feel you are getting to the end, the composer drags you back into the music, heaping on more tension, creating even greater pressure.

Today we are going to sing a little, and I need your help to torture your ears. We’re going to divide in three parts: left, middle, and right. Decide which part you’re in now. OK, Mark is going to help us sing a chord progression together. Part 1, Mark will play your part now.

<Mark plays>

OK, repeat after me. **<Sing. Repeat>** Good. Part two, here’s your part.

<Mark plays>

Repeat after me. **<Sing. Repeat>** Good. Part three.

<Mark plays>

Repeat. **<Sing. Repeat>** Alright, let’s try it all together, and hold your last note. Mark, will you give us our notes?

<Sing>

Beautiful. Can you hear where it wants to go? Hold that thought.

I didn’t want to preach on the oil spill. I really didn’t. When the Board of Parish Ministry met to brainstorm a summer worship theme and talked about what it feels like to experience summer in this place, we were talking about all kinds of good things: the relaxation of a day at the beach, the refreshment of diving into one of our springs, the fear and calm of daily thunderstorms. I thought about all the great bible stories about water: Moses in the bulrushes, Noah’s Ark, the miracle of water into wine. I even did research on your behalf: jumping waves at Anastasia State Park, taking my first tube down the Ichetucknee, and getting rained out after a long drive to Siesta Key.

But as I considered what I might preach on, as I thought about how I would capture the beauty of our waters, or the spiritual refreshment of that “living water” about which Jesus speaks, I could only think of the Gulf and the oil which has been gushing

into it since March. I could only see the images of that dark cloud of brown billowing into the blue water that is being streamed to our computers 24/7. I could only hear the endless drone of bad news about attempts to shut off the leak and restore what has been damaged and destroyed.

Though I searched through those wonderful scripture passages on water, I found the stories corrupted by our present circumstance. In Genesis the darkness which covered the face of the deep at creation became the iridescent darkness of oil coating the face of the Gulf. In Exodus, the miracle of separation at the Red Sea pointed out the ineptitude of our skimmers and containment vessels in separating oil and water. As I considered the end of the story of the golden calf, when Moses grinds up the idol and scatters the dust into the community's water supply making them drink it, I remembered my responsibility, my culpability, in this disaster. No matter how I tried I could not see my way through the oil spill to living water.

And I did try, because I did not want to preach on it. I did not even want to mention it mostly because I was and am so sick of hearing about it. I am sure some of you are in the same boat. What I do not need, nor any of us probably need, is another opportunity to rehash the facts and figures surrounding this event. I feel saturated with stories about the Gulf. I am full with details of the disaster; I am exhausted with accounts of the mechanics of what happened and what can or cannot be done to fix it; with experts speaking on the geology and physics of deepwater drilling; with the recriminations between BP, its subcontractors, Gulf state governors, democrats, and republicans; full even with, or perhaps especially with, the heart-wrenching tales of suffering caused by this awful tragedy.

It's not that these stories are unimportant or that the details should not be publicized, but at some point the latest update on the drilling of relief wells becomes beside the point for me. Hundreds of miles from plumes, and slicks, and tar balls, with no expertise in animal rescue, economic stimulus, or underwater robotics, there is only so much information I really need. At some point, reading another article or watching another segment becomes an excuse to avoid the work I really need to do, the work of lament. Right now I don't need any more information. I need, in the presence of my community and my God, to say how incredibly angry and deeply sad this oil spill has made me. I need to share that I do not know what to do, do not feel like much help, and have little faith that what needs to be done will be done quickly enough. What I need to do is to cry out, to borrow the words of Psalm 22 and ask, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken us? Why are you so far from helping us, from the words of our groaning?" or from Psalm 13, shouting, "How long must we bear pain in our souls and have sorrow in our hearts all day long?" or to steal the words of the prophet Jeremiah, crying, "How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it the animals and the birds are swept away, and because people said, 'God is blind to our ways.'" What I have really needed since March is an opportunity to cry out, to lament, to shake a fist, and to wail at everyone and no one. I have needed an opportunity to sing that note of un-resolution loud and strong.

But I have avoided it. And I tend to avoid it. So I found out when I went through the psychological testing that every candidate for ministry in our denomination must complete. After an 8 hour day of filling in bubbles on forms, I met with the psychologist to go over my results. You'll be happy to know he passed me. But he did point out that I

have a tendency, as many ministers do, to see things in a more positive light than may be appropriate, to avoid negative emotions. I argued with him in my mind, but the truth of his evaluation of me hit me when Rachelle and I were burglarized this spring. In March, in the middle of the day while both of us were away, someone kicked in our front door, went through our things, and stole a few electronics. As we surveyed the damage, I said something like, "You know, it is a violation, but at least it wasn't malicious. I mean, they didn't break anything." When Rachelle pointed out that they did, in fact, break the doorframe, I said, "Sure, but I mean, they could have really wrecked the place. I just feel like, it wasn't anything personal, just business. And they probably need the money more than we do." To which Rachelle said, "Vince, can we please stop giving the robbers the benefit of the doubt?" It wasn't till a month or so later, when I wanted so badly to listen to the music that had been on my iPod and laptop, that I finally admitted that I was angry with whoever burglarized our house.

As strange as I admit to being, I don't think I am alone in this. I believe many of us try to jump to resolution, to bypass lament and get straight to restoration. It is difficult to sit with pain and anger. Faced with a crying child who tells us, "no one likes me," we want immediately to say, "of course they do!" But sometimes what they need, what we all need, is not a cheap resolution, but a partner, a community with whom to lament. If you have lost a loved one you have probably experienced the need for resolution in some well-meaning friends or neighbors who assure you that things are for the best or that your mother or son or spouse is at peace. While these things may be true, you are not at peace, you are sad or angry or numb, and there is no reason it should be otherwise. While we may try to "fix" whatever is hurting those we love, there is no fix that lies outside the path of lament.

Even the author of our psalm this morning seems uncomfortable staying with that note of lament for too long. Did you catch that 180 turn in the middle of the Psalm? Jenny did a great job with it, but a lesser reader might get whiplash from that transition. In the span of one verse, it goes from "save me from the mouth of the lion" to "from the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me!" It seems almost like two different poems slapped together or as if, realizing what she is saying and to whom, the lamenter suddenly gets scared and retreats back into praise.

In the case of the oil spill, no one is rushing to forgiveness. But still as a country, I believe we have avoided that cry of lament, of anger, and sadness, and despair. Instead, we have tried to fill that need with news; I have read and watched and listened as if, with enough information, I will find out exactly who is responsible for what in what degree, that exactly that amount will be taken from the responsible parties, and that we will find a way to restore everything as it was before the accident within the next 72 hours. That's what I am listening for in the endless reports on the gulf because, if all that were true I would not need to lament. If all that were true, I could go on as if nothing had happened.

I believe many of us seek information over lamentation, hoping that if we truly understand the situation from every angle we will not feel that incredible tension; we will not have to face all those nagging questions. Because, at the bottom lamentation is about unanswered questions. It is no coincidence that the three biblical lamentations I quoted earlier are all driven by questions. "Why have you forsaken me?" "How long must we bear pain?" "How long will the land mourn?" Questions are the heart of lament,

questions which gnaw at us, questions which beg for answers like that leading tone begs to move the final half step. In fact the book of the Bible which we know as “Lamentations” is called “ekah” in Hebrew, which means “How.” This “how” is the traditional Hebrew exclamation at death, and it is the word repeated over and over again in biblical lament.

It is these dangerous “hows” and “whys” that I have avoided in my refusal to lament, to sound a note of unresolved anger and sadness. I have attempted to continue a safe and pleasant melody on the other keys, delaying that feeling of unresolved tension, avoiding that note of challenge. And that is what it is, a note of challenge. Like the psalmists’ cries of “why” and “how long,” lament is a gauntlet thrown down before God and the community, a challenge which cries out to be taken up, a question which begs for an answer. When we ask, “How could this happen to someone so young?” or “Why do bad things always seem to strike that family?” we air what feel like unanswerable questions and we dare someone to respond. And I believe the fear that often keeps me from asking such questions, that keeps me from singing out, from crying out, is the fear that I may not hear that note of resolution. I may not get an answer. I am afraid that, shouting out about all the pain and anger I feel I will be met only with a terrifying silence.

And this is when I’m glad that the strange second half of this psalm is there. This, I think, is why the psalmist’s lament is so intertwined from the beginning with expressions of trust in God. Because at its heart, lament is an act of faith. To ask a question suggests that one believes there may be an answer or at least someone to question. To sound that unresolved note of pain and frustration is to hope that resolution is possible, that joy will echo back. It is an act of courage, of trust, of faith, a difficult act, and it is the only act which can bring us through. There is no way around lament, no way over lament, only a way through lament. Until we ask the question, we cannot receive an answer; until we sound that seventh of lament, the octave of satisfaction will ring cheaply in our ears. Until we peer into that murky water with tears in our eyes and anger in our hearts we will not see our way through to the Living Waters of redemption. Yet if we will venture to bring our whole selves: anger, and sadness, and despair, if we will open ourselves up before God and one another, I believe we will find our way through to joy and to new life.

But first we must lift our voices and cry out. Do you remember your parts? Mark, let’s get a refresher. Part1. Part 2. Part3. OK, let’s sing, and hold your final note. Hold that thought.

<Mark plays resolution loudly.>

Amen.