

The Doctrines of 'Singing the Blues' and 'Sufficient Grace'

Pastor Laurie Hartzell's Sermon at First Presbyterian Church, Benton Harbor,
Sunday, Oct. 27, 2019

Psalm 42:1-3 (from "The Message")

A white-tailed deer drinks from the creek; I want to drink God, deep draughts of God. I'm thirsty for God-alive. I wonder, Will I ever make it – arrive and drink in God's presence? I'm on a diet of tears – tears for breakfast, tears for supper. All day long people knock at my door, pestering, "Where is this God of yours?"

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

*It is necessary to boast, nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up in the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows – was caught up in to Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; **for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.***

Bryan Stevenson is a lawyer who founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit legal practice dedicated to defending the poor, the wrongly convicted and people trapped in the furthest reaches of the criminal justice system. His book, "Just Mercy," came out in 2014, but I just finished reading it. If you haven't read it, I highly recommend it to you.

Near the end of the book, attorney Stevenson tells the story of his efforts to win release for people convicted of nonviolent crimes as juveniles and sent to prison for life. He and some other lawyers from the Equal Justice Initiative ended up taking a case to the U.S. Supreme Court, which helped changed federal laws so that it is no longer legal in this country for juveniles to be sent away for life for nonviolent crimes. I won't take the time to tell the story of his journey here, but I will tell you about a woman he met in the courthouse after he successfully litigated the freedom of two 50-year-old men who had been in prison since they were 14 for nonviolent crimes. Mr. Stevenson came out of the courtroom feeling exhausted and exhilarated. An older woman was sitting on the steps and called him over to congratulate him. He went over, and they started talking. This woman came to the courthouse most days with the sole purpose of giving

people emotional support. You see, years earlier her 16-year-old grandson had been murdered, and the two young men who murdered him were sentenced to life in prison. This woman grieved deeply that day for her grandson. But she also found herself grieving for the young men who killed him and who would be put away for life. She grieved for the families of these young men. She said there was another woman that day who just came up and sat with her for two hours after the trial, not saying a word, just being someone she could lean on. It meant the world to her. She needed that.

The woman went home and kept grieving. She didn't know what to do with herself. She decided she would come to the courthouse each day and start sitting with people who had lost loved ones or people who were seeing their loved ones get sentenced to prison terms. So much grief. She called her work "stone catching." People were casting stones at each other in the courthouse and elsewhere outside the courthouse. So many stones. And she sat with people and helped catch stones. She got this term from the story about the woman caught in adultery in the Gospels. Jesus said to the men accusing her that day that the one who was without sin should cast the first stone – no stones were thrown. Jesus supported the convicted woman. Jesus was a stone catcher. This woman saw her work – sitting in the courthouse with families of those who had been hurt by crimes and those who had committed crimes – as stone catching.

She called lawyer Stevenson a stone catcher, too. The world and the system were throwing stones at people. Stevenson was a stone catcher. And then she took his hands and massaged those stone-catching hands. She said (and I'm quoting from the book), "It hurts to catch those stones people throw. Now you keep this up and you're gonna end up like me, singing some sad songs. Ain't no way to do what we do and not learn how to appreciate a good sorrow song. I've been singing sad songs my whole life. Had to. When you catch stones, sometimes even the happy songs can make you sad. But you keep singing and your sad songs make you strong. Sometimes they even make you happy." (p. 309)

Stone catching. That's quite a term, isn't it? And while we haven't helped a person on death row who was wrongfully convicted, we do our share of stone catching around here. I think of the stones thrown at people in our community, with messages like: "You are nobody because you are poor," or, "You don't deserve a good education because you live in a town racked with poverty and because of injustices in our state and mistakes made in the community." This Thursday there was a steady stream of hungry people coming to our food pantry. One couple rode their bikes with backpacks from Stevensville to get some food. Most of us who really allow ourselves to enter into some of the hopelessness and struggle many people face also seek to look into their eyes. We seek to really see them and to try to figure out how to partner or help out in some meaningful way. We rub our hands because they are sore from stone catching. And I know that many of you, like that woman in the courthouse, could rub each other's hands that are rough with stone catching. And we find ourselves singing some sad songs, too, don't we?

The Psalms are full of sad songs. In fact, almost one-third of all the Psalms are songs of lament – songs in which people pour out their sadness, confusion and pain to God. Psalm 42, the Psalm Libby Globensky read, surely is full of confusion and sorrow, isn't it? Look at some of the

lines with me. We don't know what is going on in the psalmist's life, but it is enough for him to say, "My tears have been my food day and night." Eugene Petersen, in "The Message," says it this way: "Tears for breakfast and tears for supper." And to make matters worse, the psalmist lets us know that people are mocking him for holding onto his faith amid it all. "Where is your God?" they say as they taunt him. Read through some Psalms this week and see if you can identify with some of the sadness or remember a time when you cried out for God to help and felt silence in return. Or remember a time when you lost a loved one or felt like you were beating your head against the wall in working to support children in our broken school district, or trying to help a young mom have enough for her children to eat. Yes, those of us who do some stone catching in this world find ourselves singing some sad songs of lament.

Many of us were taught in life that when we are sad, we should "chin up" and not wallow in it. Singing songs of lament isn't wallowing in it. It is pouring out our hearts and our longings to the living God. Whoever put the Psalms together figured we would need to do this about one-third of the time in our lives.

In the African-American story, songs of lament could be called singing the blues. The blues originated in the 1870s in the South, and many people feel that the soul of the blues comes from the souls found in the cotton fields of the South when African-American slaves developed songs and poured out their souls to God in song. Here are lines from three songs that come to mind:

"Nobody knows the trouble I've seen."

"It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer."

"Go down, Moses. Let my people go!"

Sometimes we just have to sing the blues. We have to pray these Psalms of lament. The sadness, the injustice, the stone catching catch up with us. Our hands are sore, our hearts are tired, our spirits are weary.

We just have to sing some blues or pray some prayers of lament.

As you know, I'm preaching my last sermons here about things I've learned with and from you in my 10 years as your pastor and 15 years before that as a lay member of this congregation.

One of the things I've learned to do here is "sing some blues."

This past spring and summer, when the challenges concerning the Benton Harbor Area Schools district were reaching a peak, Pastor Maurice McAfee from New Bethel Baptist Church held a prayer meeting every night for 30 days. A number of us showed up for many of these prayer meetings. One night I sat next to an older woman. We were kneeling in prayer, and she was singing her prayer very quietly while rocking back and forth, asking God why He would let the children have to suffer, why her grandson would choose the streets rather than school. She said: "Why, oh Lord? I've raised them the best I know. Why?" She was pouring out her heart from its depths – singing the blues. I prayed the blues with her that day.

But, then, she did something else. She started singing her faith. She raised her hands and praised God. "It's bad, Lord, but I will trust you. You'll never let me down, and you won't let us down now. I KNOW IT!"

That's the way most of the Psalms of lament roll. A person pours out their sorrow and then claims their hope. Psalm 42 ends with hope in God. The psalmist says his soul is downcast, but then there is this decision: I will hope in God.

The Psalms of lament and the blues take us to a place of deep sorrow. And the sorrowful place is so deep that we find deeper faith in that place, and we choose to continue to follow the way of love and the path of hope.

Those of you who have been around a while remember Delores Alti. Delores was a member here for decades and had the most incredible alto voice. She died in 2012. I still miss her. Delores had two children, Nancy and Mark. Mark killed himself when he was in his mid-20s. There are no words for a loss like that. It was devastating to her and Bob, her husband. Delores told me once that most days she would wake up with her son on her mind and cry out to God. She did that from the time of Mark's death until her own death. She got used to the pain and learned to have joy in life, but it was always with her. She told me that she would tell God how she felt. She would ask God "Why?" one more time. And then, when she didn't know what else to pray, she would pray the Lord's Prayer. Delores knew how to sing the blues, pray her laments. Allowing herself to live into and feel her deep pain brought her to a deep place in her soul, and she would pray the Lord's Prayer in that deep place – claiming that place of pain for God.

There is a deep faith in this church and this community. And that faith has been born and tried in the crucible of pain, injustice and the pull of hopelessness. With Delores and many of you in this church and in this community, I've learned the power of lament. I've learned the deep faith born from lament.

Let me say it again: Lamenting can bring us to a deep place in our souls. And like the old woman said to Bryan Stevenson, if we sing sad songs enough, they make us strong. That is because when we go that deep, we can claim our faith in that deep place.

That's what Paul is saying in our text from 2 Corinthians, too. I have this thorn in my flesh, he says. Bible scholars have debated for centuries what that thorn might have been – a physical ailment or a temptation that wouldn't let him go are among the explanations. But we really don't know for sure. All we know is it was something that would not leave him. It may be like that stone of pain in our lives or our community that we keep catching over and over again.

And Paul says he will rejoice in that thorn, because it has made him go deep. It has taught him that his strength comes from something and someone stronger than himself. It comes from Christ. It comes from this all-sufficient grace of God. Grace is this gift God gives us. This gift of

love that we haven't earned. This gift of acceptance in spite of our shortcomings and doubts. This gift of belonging when we don't know where we belong. Paul says the thorn taught him that even while singing the blues, grace is enough. The love of Christ will give him what he needs.

As I look over my 25 years here with you, we've dealt with our share of thorns and done our share of stone catching: budget problems, leaking roofs, hunger, violence, abuse, personnel problems, beloved saints struggling with difficult illnesses like ALS or MS, watching our children struggle and even get incarcerated, having to bury a young woman who was finally beginning to see the light in her life but who overdosed on heroin, and more sad stories. Yep, we have experienced a mass of thorns and done our share of stone catching.

I wonder if some of that is why we are such a strong church. We've been through a lot but we know how to sing the blues. We know how to pour out our hearts to God and sometimes share with each other. And we know how to let that pain take us to deep places in ourselves where we claim God's love and power and mercy for another day. When we are weak, then we are strong.

I've learned that in significant ways here, my friends. Thank you for teaching me. Like the woman from lawyer Stevenson's book says, "Ain't no way we can do what we do without singing some good sorrow songs." But let's keep singing those songs. They send us deep. God meets us there. They make us strong.

Amen.