

Come to the Table  
Lamentations 1:1-6  
World Communion Sunday  
October 3, 2010  
Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

I grew up in Berkeley and attended Berkeley High. This was in the 60's—the enrollment was 4000 students in grades 10-12. The campus was so full, there had to be 3 lunch periods. In my junior year, my schedule was such that I found myself in a lunch period with not one single friend. For a teenager, this is hell. I handled the situation awkwardly—First I lingered at my locker, putting away my books; then I went to the restroom and took my time combing my hair; then I took my place at the end of a lunch line—preferably a long one, so that I would use up the painful time of being alone. When I had purchased my food I went around the cafeteria building to the rear. The front side was where all the action was—picnic tables, benches, snack bar lines, music playing on the open quad. But I went around back, where there was only a white wall, a few feet of asphalt, and then a chain-linked fence. I stood there leaning against the wall, facing the chain-linked fence. And there, standing alone, I ate my lunch. Really I was hiding because I didn't want anyone to see how alone I was. I would have so welcomed an invitation, had someone, anyone, said, “Hey, come eat with us. We've saved you a place.”

We find ourselves often alone in life. Perhaps you are alone after the death of someone dear to you or after a break in a relationship. Or maybe you are new to the area, having moved here at a transition time in your life or to attend college. Maybe someone you know has just been through fraternity or sorority rush and didn't get the bid and invitation hoped for. Or you've lost your job and with it your connection to the outside world, and now you are in limbo. Or maybe your days are full of responsibilities, driving on freeways in traffic, getting to appointments, trying to find time for all your responsibilities.... Though you are plenty busy, you may feel like spiritually you are running on empty. Perhaps you came here from another country, and you remember when you had trouble speaking English, and you felt alone because you were different and you didn't belong. Maybe even now you are homesick. Or maybe you are having chronic pain and it's more than you think you can manage and it makes you feel isolated. Or perhaps you feel alone simply because you are who you are—in a minority in some way in this society—because of your race, your heritage, your sexual orientation, your age, your disability, your shyness, or maybe you are adopted or your parents are divorced or you have a physical or mental illness, or you are a care taker of one who is ill and you feel isolated—isolated because of anything—anything at all that may make you feel different and somehow lonely.

Being alone and lonely is "the pits." It's really hell. Dante describes hell as a torment of loneliness and isolation, void of warmth or affection. Dante's hell is the lowest place where those condemned are totally unable to touch or communicate. Their punishment is not fire, but a tomb of ice (William Collins, "A Sermon from Hell: Toward a Theology of Loneliness").

The Book of Lamentations is about hell on earth. It is about loneliness and despair. Lamentations is poetry thought to have been written by the Prophet Jeremiah about

unspeakable suffering. The Babylonians had invaded and destroyed Jerusalem, and like a widow, she was left abandoned. Out of this experience of destruction and displacement, Jeremiah writes, "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!...She weeps bitterly in the night; ...she finds no resting place...her children have gone away" (1:1-3, 5). The poet describes the devastation of Jerusalem in such a personal lament. The suffering is as a woman all alone, weeping, even her children having left her.

You don't often hear this text read. Individuals who have suffered great loss can usually identify with this kind of despair. But in our dominant culture in the United States, as a people, we like to deny despair. We are saddened by natural disasters and human tragedies, but we tend to gloss over them quickly. After all, in church we want to pray to a God of love. —But where is the God of love in this passage? Where is the liberating God of Exodus? Where is the comforting God of Isaiah? Where is the resurrecting God of the Gospels? In Lamentations, God doesn't appear. God is hidden behind a cloud, and we are left alone in our despair. Commentaries say, "Lamentations creates a house for the sorrows of the world" (Kathleen M. O'Connor in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 6). It's a lonely place, this house, but it is a place where sorrow is at home. It's not hell (as in a place to go to when you die), but it's a kind of hell on earth, one that is very much part of the human condition.

In The United Methodist Church we don't talk a lot about heaven and hell. Every once in a while, I get into some conversation with a person who wants to know whether I've been "saved." Of course, I answer, "Yes," but I have a good guess, my understanding of salvation is different from that person's. Our church is not concerned with people being saved so that they can escape hell. Wesleyan theology points to salvation here and now. John Wesley said we are saved because God loves us as God's own children. We can reject God's love, but if we receive it, welcome it, and respond to it, then we participate in our own salvation. "We are active participants in God's love in us and in the world, 'working out our own salvation' by the grace of God" (William H. Willimon in *This We Believe*, p.91).

At Jesus' banquet, all are welcome. Jesus says to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind! At the Lord's table our sins are forgiven. All we have to do is come. Out of sadness, just come. Out of abandonment and loneliness, just come. In your house of sadness, Jesus has created a table. It's where he met with his disciples long ago and told them they would soon be alone, yet he took bread and wine and told them to eat and drink and remember him.

We participate in our own salvation when we receive this gift of bread and wine, and give it meaning, a transforming meaning that changes loneliness to communion with God. The bread of life and the cup of salvation are given to us. When we take the bread and the cup, we acknowledge that God is with us. At the table, we are participating in our own salvation by saying, "Come out from behind that cloud, God, I know you are there." And we participate in the salvation of our society and world when we invite others also to the table. The table is open to all. No one need feel alone. "Come eat with us. We've saved you a place."