

# The Kindness of Lament

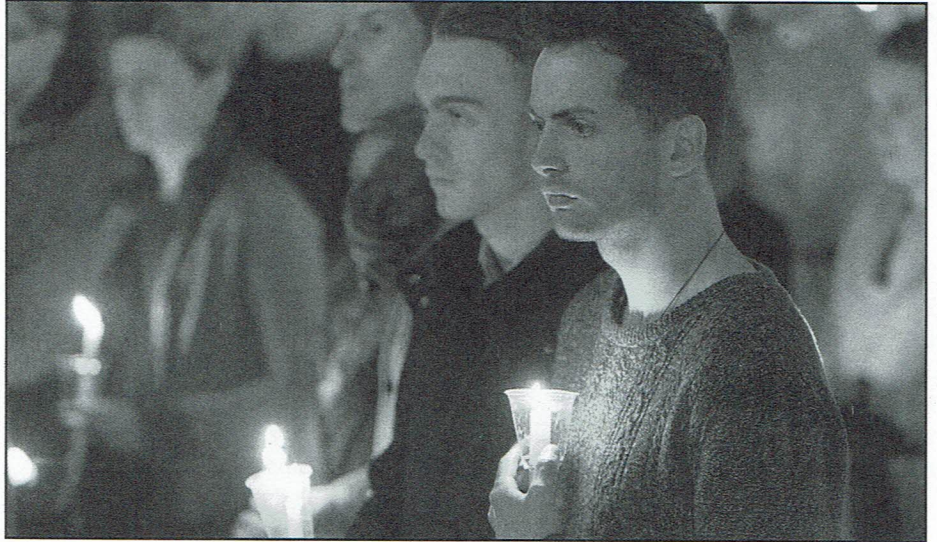
by the Rev. Joe Hensley

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**“What do we do now?”**  
In the wake of tragedies that shake the core of our communities and nations, this question shakes our souls. After the violence last year in Orlando, Baton Rouge, St. Paul, Dallas, France, Syria, and so many other places, there have been calls for prayer and cries of mourning for those lost. At the same time, almost immediately after a tragedy, fingers are pointed and leaders repeat ad nauseum that we need to come together and solve the problems. Of course we want and need to respond, even when the tragedies may be far away from us. Rushing to solutions, though, may mean missing the deeper need for healing. What do we do now? We first need time to be sad and space to be angry. We need time and space to lament.

Lament is a word we do not use very much, as we have neglected its importance. Lament is not just being sad. In its roots, it means “to wail.” Wailing carries all kinds of emotions that we need to express if we are to heal: confusion, sadness, frustration, even anger. When we lament, we give voice to those emotions and let them lead us, eventually, toward hope. We hear this so often in the prayers of the Hebrew Bible known as the Psalms. Psalm 22 begins with this famous lamentation: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” After many verses of despair, the poet eventually turns the corner toward hope in God’s mercy: “You are my strength...” Blues music is another example of the hopeful power of lament. Even as the singer wails about lost love or tough times, the cadence and melody of the music lifts the heart to face another day.

Too often though, the voices of lament are squelched in the aftermath of a tragedy. America, especially, tends more toward an attitude of fortitude. Rather than sing the blues at memorials and vigils, we sing patriotic and hopeful tunes to inspire us to stay strong and forge ahead. Even the song “We Shall Overcome,” which I love for its amazing capacity to bring people together in hope, does not mention sorrow. Protesters take to the streets,



At a vigil for victims of the shooting last year in Orlando, Florida

but anger and sadness often give way to confrontation instead of consolation. There are few spaces where it is okay to fall apart and wail. There are few people who will just listen without trying to convince us that our crying is somehow out of place.

When we rush to action without taking the time to mourn and feel the pain of loss, we tamp down an essential part of the healing process. We are afraid of the emotions, maybe because they seem depressing. It is actually more depressing when we stuff away our sadness. Our society is in many ways depressed. We talk about meaningful change but just cannot seem to make it happen. The way for individuals and society to heal from depression is to shine a light on the sadness, not push it away.

Maybe the greatest kindness we can offer in these troubled times is to welcome a cry of lament. Our first impulse may be to rush to “fix it,” but kindness is deeper than offering fast solutions. The kindness of lament is the space and permission to be human and to mourn without harm or judgment. Lament does not seek to hurt another. Its purpose is healing of the soul. “What do we do now?” We fall apart, and then we pick up the pieces together. Lament is not a downward spiral of negativity. It moves downward at first and then turns toward hope.

How do we show each other this kindness? We first need to give ourselves permission to lament.

This does not mean we have to cover our heads in ashes or make some public display, although it might take some outward form. For me, just the awareness of my own voice sighing within me connects me, in a physical way, to the sound of the world’s suffering. When someone else is expressing their pain, we can simply listen. We can say, “I know it hurts.” We can offer a cup of water, a tissue, a safe place to wail, even when it is hard to hear. We can resist the temptation to rush to solutions or tell people to be quiet. We can create safe places in the community where this wailing can happen uninterrupted. Even if someone else’s pain is not something we personally experience, we can lament in solidarity. The reality of pain and loss is common to us all.

Breathe deeply. Welcome the moaning and groaning. Lament is kindly reminding us that we are human. Hope will arrive too, but it might take its time. Our impatience for results may actually work against deeper solutions. The kindness of lament requires a willingness to wait and trust. Maybe this is the meaning behind Psalm 30:5: “Weeping needs to endure for a night, so that joy can come in the morning.”