

Acknowledgment and Lament

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Preacher: Heidi Mills

[0 : 00] Good evening, Table Church. My name is Heidi, as Pastor Anthony just said, and I serve as the Director of Community here at the Table. And it is so nice. It is always an honor to stand in front of you.

And I am so grateful and humbled to be a part of a church that not only seeks to follow after Christ, but takes the time and the intentionality to really see and know people and just lean into our gifts and encourage them in people.

And I am just so grateful that I have been given the chance to preach and continue our series on race and justice this week. So Pastor Anthony introduced this series last week by walking us through each of the nine steps toward racial reconciliation.

And these steps are taken from Latasha Morrison's book, *Be the Bridge*. And if Skylar wants to put a slide on the screen with those nine steps, they are awareness, acknowledgement and lament, shame and guilt, confession, seeking and extending forgiveness, repentance, making amends, reconciliation and restoration, and reproduction.

And Pastor Anthony shared last week that awareness is only the first step to a multi-step process. We can't remain stuck only in awareness, but neither can we jump straight from awareness to reconciliation.

[1 : 18] And this week, I'm going to be walking us through the second step, which is acknowledgement and lament. But before I do that, I want to take the time to address what might be an elephant in the room for some folks.

Before I even spoke a word, hundreds of years of history spoke for me. I cannot separate my words and what I'm about to say from my identity as a white woman. I cannot avoid acknowledging the fact that white women have used and taken up a certain space in these conversations surrounding race.

We have used our closeness to power to speak over people of color, particularly black women. And many of you have probably heard of the concept of white women's tears, in which we center our own experiences and de-center the experiences of people of color.

And I cannot escape this reality. It shapes the way I show up in front of you today. And I am still in the process of learning how my identity is trapped in these cycles of white supremacy.

And so I am not coming to you today as any sort of expert on racial reconciliation. I am on this journey with you. I am walking through these steps with you. And I am the farthest thing from an expert.

[2 : 31] So I want to make it clear that I am not going to say anything new about race today. People of color have been telling you and telling us all these realities over and over again.

And all we need to get started are ears to hear. No one needs me as a white woman to give you a hot take on racism. So while I am going to be talking about acknowledgement and lament today, I urge you after this sermon to seek after the voices of people of color, because they can speak to these realities far better than I can.

So with all that said, I want to start with some prayer. Dear Lord, strengthen us today as the table church for this path ahead.

Give us ears to hear, Lord, and eyes to see the presence of injustice all around us, Lord. And help us not to try to move too quickly to a place of triumphalism or try to repair it right away.

But give us the courage to lament as you have called us to do. And allow us to know deep in our souls that as we mourn, you mourn with us. And you are always present with us in these realities.

[3 : 40] In Jesus' name, amen. So lament is one of those weird concepts in the Bible that we hear a lot in church, but we don't really know what it really is.

It's something that we don't practice much in our churches, if at all. And this really makes sense because we all want to leave church every Sunday feeling uplifted and energized for the coming week.

We don't want to leave church feeling downtrodden and upset. We all know it's a messed up world out there. And part of the beauty of church is that we can escape that reality for an hour on Sunday before diving into the Monday blues and the hecticness of our work week.

But we can't get to Easter Sunday without enduring Good Friday. An influential biblical scholar, Sung Chan-Ra, defines lament in this way. If Skylar wants to put the slide on the screen.

Lament in the Bible is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble. Lament is an opportunity to talk to God, whether individually or collectively, about the realities of pain and trouble in our life.

[4 : 49] And one of those realities is the existence of injustice and oppression. The Bible is full of examples of lament, but I'm going to focus primarily on the book of Psalms.

If you have a Bible, I want you to flip it open or turn it on and go to Psalm 44. And I want to lay out a little bit of context for this psalm. We don't know exactly when it was written, but it was likely authored at a time when Israel had suffered this tremendous loss, and to them it seemed like God had abandoned them, that God had broken the promises that God had given to them, and they couldn't comprehend why God would do that.

So I'm going to read the entire psalm out loud, and the words will not be on the screen. So I just invite you to either follow along in your own copy, or just close your eyes and imagine yourself in the shoes of the psalmist.

Starting in verse 1. We have heard God with our own ears. Our ancestors told us about it, about the deeds you did in their days, in days long past.

You, by your own hand, removed all the nations, but you planted our ancestors. You crushed all the peoples, but you set our ancestors free. No, not by our own swords did they take possession of the land.

[6 : 12] Their own arms didn't save them. No, it was your strong hand, your arm, in the light of your face, because you were pleased with them. It's you, God, you who are my king, the one who ordered salvation for Jacob.

We've pushed our foes away by your help. We've trampled our enemies by your name. No, I won't trust in my bow. My sword won't save me, because it's you who saved us from our foes. You have put those who hate us to shame.

So we glory in God at all times and give thanks to your name forever. But now, you've rejected and humiliated us. You no longer accompany our armies.

You make us retreat from the enemy. Our adversaries plunder us. You've handed us over like sheep for butchering. You've scattered us among the nations. You've sold your people for nothing, not even bothering to set a decent price.

You've made us a joke to all our neighbors. We're mocked and ridiculed by everyone around us.

You've made us a bad joke to the nations, something to be laughed at by all peoples.

[7 : 16] All day long, my disgrace confronts me, and shame covers my face, because of the voices of those who make fun of me and badmouth me, because of the enemy who is out for revenge.

All this has come upon us, but we haven't forgotten you or broken your covenant. Our hearts haven't turned away, neither have our steps stayed from your way. But you've crushed us in the place where jackals live, covering us with deepest darkness.

We had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to some strange deity. Wouldn't God have discovered it? After all, God knows every secret of the heart. No, God, it's because of you that we are getting killed every day.

It's because of you that we are considered sheep ready for slaughter. Wake up! Why are you sleeping, Lord? Get up! Don't reject us forever! Why are you hiding your face? Forgetting our suffering and oppression.

Look, we are going down to the dust. Our stomachs are flat on the ground. Stand up! Help us! Save us for the sake of your faithful love. So, this psalm teaches us several important things about lament.

[8 : 28] Lament is a movement. It is a process of naming the realities of the harm that has been done, sitting with God in anger and sorrow, holding God accountable, and identifying with those on the margins.

Latasha Morrison puts it this way in *Be the Bridge*. Um, if Skylar wants to put the quote up. Lamenting something horrific that has taken place allows a deep connection to form between the person lamenting and the harm that was done. And that emotional connection is the first step to creating a pathway for healing and hope. We have to sit in the sorrow, avoid trying to fix it right away, avoid our attempts to make it all okay. Only then is the pain useful. Only then can it lead us into healing and wisdom. So, Psalm 44 reveals the deep fault lines between God's promises that had been fulfilled so long ago and the fact that they now seem so broken in the light of reality. We can learn so much from this example, but the first lesson is this. True lament cannot happen without acknowledgement. acknowledgement. And acknowledgement begins when we name our present reality as it truly is and not as we would like it to be. [9 : 49] So, last week, Pastor Anthony defined racial reconciliation according to Shaniqua Walker-Barnes' book, *I Bring the Voices of My People*. I want to read the definition out loud again for those who are just joining us today.

It will also be on the screen. Racial reconciliation is part of God's ongoing and eschatological mission to restore wholeness and peace to a world broken by systemic injustice. Racial reconciliation focuses its efforts on dismantling white supremacy. And so, she goes on in this book to talk about how most modern attempts at racial reconciliation, particularly those led by white evangelicals, focus more on the passive activity of keeping the peace. It's like, if you just play nice, get along with each other, be friends, then racial injustice will disappear. But Shaniqua Walker-Barnes calls us to a form of actively making peace. And sometimes it surprises us to turn over a few tables. And she talks about how our efforts at racial reconciliation must begin with confrontational truth-telling. [11 : 00] We must be willing to confront a present reality, to name what is really happening, and from there, move into lament. And so, for me, I remember growing up in small-town Maine and hearing stories about how America was this great Christian nation built on liberty and equality for all.

History class basically taught me that, yeah, that whole slavery thing was awful, but Lincoln freed all the slaves, and Martin Luther King Jr. fought for voting rights, and now we're all free. Yay! But I never thought to question why exactly I never saw any students of color at my school, or why I never had a black professor until seminary. And I never asked why. We would often talk about how Maine was considered one of the whitest states in the Union, but we never analyzed why that is, how it came to be that way. And I certainly didn't connect to these omissions, to the conversations about Obama's election, and how we live in a post-racial society, or the unarmed shooting, or the police shootings of unarmed black men.

We just didn't make those connections. So my view of the world growing up was almost entirely whitewashed. And I know I'm not the only one in this room who had a similar experience. And so we have to be willing to confront the fact that our history has been whitewashed. [12 : 20] As Amanda Gorman said in her inauguration poem, being American is more than the pride we inherit. It's the past we step into and how we repair it. It is only when we step into the past and acknowledge how it informs our present that we are able to wrestle with the pain of our shared history.

And in Psalm 44, we see a little bit about how this process worked. The psalmist began by recounting the glory days, how God had planted Israel's ancestors, set them in this land, fought for them, given them victories over their enemy. But then, in verse 9, things take this turn. And the psalmist starts to talk about how God has rejected them. And he gives so many examples. He has made the Israelites like sheep for slaughter. He has scattered them among the nations. He has sold his people for a trifle. They are scorned and rejected. The psalmist does not hold back. He tells the truth. And we can see echoes of this language to this day in the realities of slavery and the realities that we have scattered indigenous peoples to lands that are not their own. These words in this psalm ring just as true today as they did back then. So we must find the courage to look the truth of our history in the face and resolve to not blink in a world that constantly wants to close our eyes.

[13 : 46] And the truth that we have to confront is that racism has not been entirely about broken human relationships. Instead, it's about this broken system that takes so many different forms.

We can see it in the continued legacies of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and mass incarceration within our black communities. We see it in the places of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Dante Wright, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, all others who have borne the weight of police brutality and state-sanctioned violence.

I go spend the rest of my time reciting a list of names of all the people who have died, and maybe that would, in fact, be the best use of my time. But we also see it in the toxic combination of Christian purity culture and the over-sexualization of Asian women that led to the tragic spa shootings in Atlanta.

We see it in the detention centers for immigrant children from Central and South America that still exist on our border, and we see it in the high mortality rates from COVID-19 among black Americans and indigenous peoples.

Everywhere we lurk, the realities are all around us, and we have to name those realities and let that naming lead us to lament. And this is my second point, or leads me to my second point, rather, which is that lament invites us to sit with God in an attitude of anger and sorrow and hold God accountable.

[15 : 14] Now, for a lot of us, the idea of holding God accountable kind of sets a shiver of fear down our spines. We are kind of like looking around and be like, are we even allowed to do that? Is God going to smite me down with a bolt of lightning if I try to ask a question?

But holding God accountable is exactly what the psalmist does. If you want to look down in the text, you'll see in verses 17 through 19 that the psalmist explicitly claims that they are not deserving of this affliction and oppression.

And he goes on to say, a couple verses after, that God is the one who is responsible for their oppression. And he tries to wake God up to get God to do something for his people already.

So once again, we see a movement from acknowledging the harm that was done to lament, which culminates in this final plea, this asking of God to help them.

So Skylar is going to put the words from the psalm on the screen, and I just want you to consider what it might mean to say those words, to plead with the psalmist. Wake up.

[16 : 21] Why are you sleeping, Lord? Get up. Don't reject us forever. Why are you hiding your face, forgetting our suffering and oppression? Look, we're going down to the dust.

Our stomachs are flat on the ground. Stand up. Help us. Save us for the sake of your faithful love. These are incredibly powerful words.

just imagine what it might be like to be equally as bold in our prayers to God. Now, I acknowledge that some of the language in this psalm doesn't make much sense to us.

I personally struggle with the belief that God is in any way responsible for oppression, or even that God forgets God's people. I tend to think that humans oppress other humans and then justify it using God language.

But that said, the Israelites believed that if God is faithful to bring about judgment, God will be faithful to bring redemption. And God is always and forever seeking to bring people into the fullness of freedom.

[17 : 25] And according to Sung Chan Ra, the scholar I mentioned earlier, lament allows us to call out to God for mercy. It challenges the church to acknowledge the real suffering in the world and plead with God for intervention.

and this act of lament can look different for each of us. For people of color, lament is an opportunity to bring the full weight of your lived experience with oppression to Christ, who fully understands and fully identifies, as I will talk about later.

And for white people in particular, lament requires us to acknowledge our own complicity, to recognize when we have in fact been the oppressor rather than the ones longing for freedom and to repent, to turn around, to go in a different direction.

And at the same time, all of us must recognize when we are participating in systems of injustice, which takes many different forms, from economic exploitation to the ways that people are marginalized within and among and between other marginalized groups.

For example, when we consider homophobia or economic exploitation or the fact that we often don't see the homeless person as we walk out of church the next day. And so, we have to acknowledge

that.

[18 : 41] But we also have to know that when we are faced with injustice and oppression, we don't have to be afraid to confront God about it. Latasha Morrison says in *Be the Bridge* that lament is meant to lead us into an attitude of repentant connection to God.

God is the source of our hope and our redemption. As we connect with God, as we ask God to intervene in injustice, we have to begin to discern what our role in this process might be. Because we have a role. We can ask God to rescue us, but that does not absolve us from the responsibility to do something ourselves. And this leads me to my third and final point. Lament is meant to lead us past shame and into solidarity. The purpose of lament is not to make white people feel guilt or shame. These feelings, as we'll talk about next week, are a way station on this process of racial reconciliation, but we are not meant to remain stuck there. The true purpose of lament is to give us permission to feel our emotions deeply, including the pain we've experienced or caused, and allow those emotions to lead us all to a posture of, I'm with you, we're in this together.

[19 : 56] As Brene Brown says, the antidote to shame is empathy. Caitlin Curtis, progressive Christian author and member of the Potawatomi tribe, wrote an incredible book called *Native*, and Skylar's going to put a quote from her book on the screen in which she takes profound insights from her indigenous roots in spirituality.

As humans, we are all interconnected at our root base, and in our struggle to understand what it means to be human to one another and to care for this created world, we are constantly exchanging experiences with one another, good medicine with one another, stories and relationships that are born from the deep well of God.

Sometimes, we forsake that sacred knowledge and instead trade violence, oppression, or fear with one another. On the one hand, healing begets healing, and community begets community. On the other hand, oppression begets oppression and hate begets hate. We must choose what kind of people we want to be for the sake of all of us.

Every day, we get to choose what we will do with our interconnectedness. Will we use it to oppress or will we use it to heal? Will we use it to enslave or will we use it to liberate?

[21 : 17] No one can make that choice for us. But we know what choice Jesus made. Philippians 2 tells us that Jesus Christ did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus entered into the reality of our suffering humanity to redeem and liberate us. And this death of Jesus Christ on a cross remains the cornerstone of our Christian faith.

It's what Easter Sunday is all about, and yet understanding why this really matters to us can be almost impossible to articulate. It becomes more about something we wear around our neck or a way that we can have an insurance policy to get to heaven after we die rather than how we live our lives in the present.

We have separated the cross from social justice, but James Cone, who is a very influential black theologian, wrote this book called *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, which I honestly consider must-reading for all Americans.

And in this book, he writes, *The Cross* places God in the midst of a crucified people, in the midst of people who are hung, shot, burned, and tortured.

[22 : 41] God inhabits the space of the marginalized and the oppressed. Most American Christians have failed to link the cross with the lynching tree, but James Cone makes this connection very clear.

2,000 years ago, Jesus died on the cross. He died on a tree, which was considered a curse way to die by the Israelites. And flash forward to today, and we have not connected this death on a tree with the black victims of lynching in this country.

Jesus' death on a tree signifies his willingness to enter into solidarity with the oppressed, to give his life, to inhabit it fully. And Cone writes that we all recognize that Jesus did not deserve this death on a tree, and all those who are oppressed can look to Jesus' example and recognize we do not deserve this either.

Our affliction and our oppression is not God's will for our lives. It's not how God created us. It's not what the kingdom is all about. And Jesus' ultimate victory over the forces of death and oppression

and injustice is their source of hope.

And this is a challenge for us because it reminds us that if we do not see Christ in the faces of those exploited and oppressed, we do not see Christ at all.

[24 : 01] If we are looking for Christ, we could hardly do better than to try to find him in the margins among those who long for healing and liberation. That's where he lived and died.

That's where he is now, and that's where he will always continue to be. In our relationship with Christ, the way we are slowly and steadily trying to become more like Christ in our daily lives, that should lead us to identify with the struggles for freedom in our midst and take those struggles on as our own struggle because we are all a part of each other.

We all belong to each other. and when we acknowledge this truth, it leaves us free to look at our lives with fresh eyes.

We are free to listen to people when they tell you the realities of systemic oppression or to rest in the truth that God inhabits the struggle of the oppressed fully and completely.

And we can let these realities sink into our thoughts, minds, and hearts. We can feel our emotions as they come up, and we are able to recognize that interconnectedness to all things, to all people, and move to a posture of empathy and solidarity.

[25 : 14] And it's not always easy to acknowledge this truth. It can hurt like hell sometimes. But it will always be better than the alternative. We cannot do the work of fixing systemic injustice and oppression on our own.

And this sermon is not even getting to fixing it yet. It's only about sitting in it. But we cannot stop ourselves from beginning the journey and sitting in this messy middle.

And this road toward justice requires lament. And lament is a vehicle toward healing, justice, and reconciliation. And I believe that lament is best practiced within community.

So at the end of Latasha Morrison's book, *Be the Bridge*, she includes this liturgy of lament. And in a minute, I'm going to invite you to stand up and join me in this. But before that, I just wanted to say that there may be some lines in this lament that ring more or less true for you.

And that's okay. If the line does not ring true for you as I read them, either consider what might ring true for you and just allow it to move you into a posture of lament.

[26 : 28] lament. So, if you will stand, I will lead us through this call in response lament. The words are going to be on the screen.

I will read the words in regular text and you'll just read the words in bold. We acknowledge that we stood by when the dwellings of our neighbors were cast down and we ignored the cries of the innocent.

Lord, have mercy. We lament. Lord, we acknowledge that we have not learned to do right. We do not seek restorative justice that benefits all.

We have not defended the oppressed. We have not taken up the cause of the fatherless or pleaded the case of the widow. Instead, we have mocked and punished the poor with our partisanship and apathy.

Lord, have mercy. We lament. We lament that we stood by as systemic and institutionalized racism became founding pillars in America and within the church.

[27 : 34] Lord, have mercy. We lament. We have allowed agendas of an empire to become prominent within your church. We understand that empire aims to take and oppress.

We have replaced your kingdom with an empire mentality. Lord, have mercy. We lament. We have formed and developed church structures and denominations while excluding the voice of your global church due to racism and racial segregation.

Lord, have mercy. We lament. We acknowledge the racial hierarchies and structures of privilege many have benefited from and many have been oppressed by.

Lord, have mercy. We lament. We have ignored the cries of children because they were not our own. We have discounted the pain of mothers because they were not our own.

We have turned a blind eye to the affliction of brown and black people because they were not our own. Lord, have mercy. We lament. We have replaced your supremacy with idolization of our nation and racial identity.

[28 : 47] Lord, have mercy. we lament. We have not required justice. We have not loved others well. We have not walked in humility in our brokenness.

Lord, have mercy. We cry out to you, our God and Redeemer, as the only one who can save us from ourselves. Show us our blind spots.

Don't let us hide from you in our shame and guilt. Restore us to your perfect union that can be found in Christ. Lord, show us how to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you.

Lord, have mercy. Jesus said, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Lord, with deep sorrow, we lament.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.