

## Poetry of Lament and Hope

by Patty Friesen, Memorial Sunday, November 25, 2018

I have attended enough deaths and participated in enough funerals in my career to know that words are inadequate to the tender holy ground of the deaths of our loved ones. And I've sat through enough *bad* funeral sermons to know that it would have been better if we had just kept silent and not said anything at all. For Memorial Sunday today, I would like to turn to the poetry of lament and hope given to us in the psalms - God's poetry of lament and hope for us - and in the sensitive poets of our time. We will begin with poet Liesl Mueller came to the US when she was fifteen, her father forced to flee to Nazis. In her poem "When I am Asked," she describes how the death of her mother at the age of fifty-four moved her to write poetry.

When I am asked  
how I begin writing poems,  
I talk about the indifference of nature.

It was soon after my mother died,  
a brilliant June day,  
everything blooming.

I sat on a grey stone bench  
in a lovingly planted garden,  
but the day lilies were as deaf  
as the ears of drunken sleepers  
and the roses curved inward.  
Nothing was black or broken  
and not a leaf fell  
and the sun blared endless commercials  
for summer holidays.

I sat on a grey stone bench  
ringed with the ingenu faces  
of pink and white impatiens  
and place my grief  
in the mouth of language,  
the only thing that would grieve with me

I am going to begin using more poetry and psalms in funerals because I struggle to find traditional religious language adequate to the task of comfort sometimes. Sometimes we think if we had enough faith, we wouldn't have to grieve or lament and yet the psalms and Jesus on the cross give us strong images of lament. Jesus quoted Psalm 22 at the time of his death. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day but you do not answer, and by night but find no rest. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast, my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death." These are not the words of one resigned to death or thinking that they are destined for a "better place." Poets Edna St. Vincent Millay and WH Auden also write poetry of lament and regret.

Dirge Without Music BY EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.  
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind:  
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned  
With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned.

Lovers and thinkers, into the earth with you.  
Be one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust.  
A fragment of what you felt, of what you knew,  
A formula, a phrase remains,—but the best is lost.

The answers quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter, the love,—  
They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses. Elegant and curled  
Is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom. I know. But I do not approve.  
More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world.

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave  
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;  
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.  
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

Poem of Lament by W H Auden....

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,  
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,  
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

We need these unresolved expressions of grief, even if they make us uncomfortable. They are raw and they are honest and we don't often allow that in our funerals, rushing too quickly to the comfort without allowing the wounds of grief to breathe. But the reason we have public gatherings for grief and telling the life story of the one who has died is because we are looking for some kind of comfort. The other extreme of the religious service that doesn't allow grief is the secular service that has *inadequate* words of comfort. It pains me to attend non-religious funerals with pop songs like the Wind Beneath My Wings and power point picture shows that leave me dangling unsupported with no anchor in the sea of grief. Our Christian faith gives us the anchors of music and ancient practiced scripture for comfort. Like the moving words and music of the hymn: Come, Come With Me to the Old Churchyard sung by the Mennonite Wailin' Jenny's at OMC 90, who will sing it for us now.

Come, come with me to the old churchyard  
I so well know these paths 'neath the soft green sward  
Friends slumber in there that we want to regard  
We will trace out their names in the old churchyard

Mourn not for them for their trials are o'er  
Why weep for those who will weep no more?  
For sweet is their sleep, though cold and hard  
Their pillows may be in the old churchyard

I know it's vain when friends depart  
To breathe kind words to a broken heart  
And I know that the joy of life is marred  
When we follow lost friends to the old churchyard

But were I at rest 'neath yonder tree  
Why would you weep, my friends, for me?  
I'm so weary, so wayworn, why would you retard  
The peace that I seek in the old churchyard?

Why weep for me, for I'm anxious to go  
To that haven of rest where no tears e'er flow?  
And I fear not my fate when it's time to depart  
I will sail with the sun in the old churchyard

I rest in the hope that one bright day  
Sunshine will burst through these prisons of clay  
And the trumpets will sound on the hills near and far  
Will wake up the dead in the old churchyard.

This gentle hymn gives a gentle image of earthly holding in a sleepy churchyard with the Christian hope of resurrection without the heavy handed theology that some of us may have grown up with. I find great comfort in these kind of hymns that we've sung today. Our other great comfort beyond music, scripture is grounding of love and the cycles of life in nature, in the God who created us and to whom we return as reflected in the nature poetry of Jane Kenyon in Let Evening Come....

Let the light of late afternoon  
shine through chinks in the barn, moving  
up the bales as the sun moves down.  
Let the cricket take up chafing  
as a woman takes up her needles  
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned  
in long grass. Let the stars appear  
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.  
Let the wind die down. Let the shed  
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop  
in the oats, to air in the lung let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't  
be afraid. God does not leave us  
comfortless, so let evening come.

Amen.

We will light candles in memory of our loved ones and if you'd like to say their names  
aloud in the microphone, please do so. (silence)

Prayer: Our loving God who holds us and grieves with us, thank you for your deep  
embrace of comfort today as we remember our loved ones. Go with us into the rest of  
the day and week as a friend who always walks beside us. Amen.