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Lamentations 3:17-33, Mark 5:21-43

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text is the opening verses of the appointed First Lesson for this day, the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost. Jeremiah, the traditional author of Lamentations, sings with joy of the love of the Lord:

<sup>22</sup>The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
<sup>23</sup>they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23, NRSV)

And so it is that the appointed reading begins with this lovely expression of faith in the steadfast love of the LORD, with its delight in how that love “never ceases” and is rich in contrivance<sup>1</sup> such that the mercies of the LORD “are new every morning.” Later in this liturgy we will sing a hymn based on this text -- the stirring hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.”

Yet it seems to me that our appointed reading starts too late in the chapter, thereby depriving us of a precious setting for this testimony to God’s love. Therefore I have been bold enough to expand our reading a little bit, beginning it a few verses earlier. I am eager to include these earlier verses because they tell the rest of the story. Indeed, it seems to me that these earlier verses cause the delightful verses to shine even brighter, as if forming a gold setting for some precious stone. For these earlier verses reveal that the one who rejoices in the steadfast love of the LORD is also one who is well acquainted with sorrow. This Third Chapter of Lamentations is akin to the Psalms in that regard. Often in our Monday evening Bible Study we have noticed the wonderful variety of emotions in the Psalms, such that the depths of despair are often followed straight on with some beautiful expression of confidence in the LORD.

So it is with this morning’s reading from Lamentations. This delight in the steadfast love of the Lord is set against some of the most haunting poetry in the Bible. I have included only a verse of two, but my! What a story they tell. Let me read these earlier verses again. Jeremiah says this:

<sup>17</sup>my soul is bereft of peace;  
I have forgotten what happiness is;  
<sup>18</sup>so I say, “Gone is my glory,  
and all that I had hoped for from the LORD.”

“My soul is bereft of peace.” What a cry! Jerusalem is sacked. The Babylonians have driven many of the leading citizens of the land into exile. In the religious

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<sup>1</sup> A phrase I remember from St. John Chrysostom, somewhere.

conceptuality of the ancient world, Judah's defeat by Babylon means that Israel's God -- the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob -- is disproved. All is wreck and ruin. We can imagine the prophet with great sorrow in his heart: I have no peace. Maybe I used to have peace, in yesteryear, but no longer. My soul is dry and parched, without a sunny ray shining in it. I remember being happy once, but I no longer am. I hardly even remember what happiness is.

Yet this is the one who can shortly thereafter speak of the love of God that never ceases, that can never be exhausted, and that is new every morning. What a wonderful transition! I pray for such a happy transition for anyone who is troubled or dispirited. I pray that their sorrow will soon give way to sure confidence in the love of God and delight in his daily mercies.

Notice the wonderful creativity of the Lord's love:

<sup>22</sup>The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
<sup>23</sup>they are *new* every morning;

Some people love in this manner, with creativity. My Carol, for example, loves that way. Her mind seems always to be thinking, her eyes searching, her heart reaching out, hands busy sewing or drawing or cooking. She is inventive in how she loves the boys and me. She is never at a loss for giving a present.

But some of us are more plodding. We think of flowers or chocolates easy enough, but become awkward when we venture into some new expression of love.

The Lord's love is of the inventive kind. Morning by morning he figures out new ways to love us and to bestow mercies on us.

And he loves in this manner not simply because that is how big and grand his heart is, but also for another reason: you *need* such creative love, and so do I. For morning by morning we face a *new* array of troubles and threats. Our ancient enemies, sin, death, and the devil, never weary of launching their assaults on us. They are clever chess players, relentless in trying to capture us and to drag us down.

But the cleverness of our enemies is more than matched by the creative love of the Lord. He has labored *this day too* to save us. Who knows the thrusts he has parried on our behalf simply as we walked to church this morning? Who knows the devilish offensive maneuvers he will thwart for us this afternoon? We pass through dangers, both known and unknown, but his love has carried us this far and will continue with even more earnestness till we make it to heaven.

Much of our Maker's ceaseless love for us takes the form of the regularities by which he rules his creation. The natural laws described by scientists are laws of love, in the end -- regularities providing some measure of stability and predictability to our human life.

But ever once in a while, the Lord enriches his natural laws in order to give us a glimpse into his divine determination to save us. He reminds us that his kingdom is coming one way or the other, whether through his natural laws or through his miracles. One way or the other, he means to get the job done.

Such a thing happened in this morning's Gospel story about the hemorrhaging woman. Our hearts could well go out to this woman. Year by weary year has passed, and she still suffers. Jeremiah's lament could well be her own:

<sup>17</sup>my soul is bereft of peace;  
I have forgotten what happiness is;

She is beset with a medical, social, and financial futility that some modern people have known too, only too well. St. Mark puts it this way:

<sup>26</sup>[she] had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. (Mark 5:26, RSV)

For twelve years she had suffered with a flow of blood. Twelve years is a long time. Morning by morning she faced her same affliction. Who could blame her if she had become discouraged by it? I should think that such a constant bleeding would take a physical toll on her, wearing her down, depriving her of energy, forcing her to drag herself through her daily tasks.

But besides the burdens of physical ailments there were the religious restrictions of those days. Some medical ailments were fine from the community's point of view, probably most were. The community did not mind, I bet, if you had a headache or a broken arm. But this woman's community did mind that she had a flow of blood. She was not supposed to mingle with folks then. But her flow of blood was continual, and so, by the community standards, she was supposed to be lonely.

This partly explains her sense of fear when Jesus asked "Who touched me?" She was probably frightened because of what she had accomplished: she had received healing in an unauthorized way. But also, she might have been afraid because she was not supposed to be part of that crowd in the first place. She was not supposed to be there! Yet she was there, God bless her!

So, morning by morning for the past twelve years had been days of discouragement for her. But this particular morning, she encountered the truth of Jeremiah's lamentation: The mercies of the LORD are new every morning.

Stepping back some to get an overview of things, twelve years earlier two sisters of Christ began their journeys. In today's Gospel story, their paths cross in the presence of the Great Physician of body and soul. The woman with the continual bleeding had suffered for twelve years. And the little daughter of Jairus was twelve years old when Jesus restored her to life and gave the happy command to her parents, "Give her something to eat."

One sister started off in joy, I imagine: a newborn baby in the arms of her mother. I hope her dozen years had included much fun, skipping and jump roping and so on. It is easy enough to see that she was loved, for in today's Gospel story her father, president of the local synagogue, throws himself at the feet of Jesus and beseeches him to come and save his daughter. Great love compelled this, since it was unusual on two counts: first, that the leader of the synagogue should humble himself before this newcomer, Jesus, and second, that he should plead on behalf of a daughter, since the ancient world

tended to focus more on boy children than girls. But no matter to this father. He loves his daughter and does all in his power to save her.

At the same time, twelve years earlier, the other sister started her journey of suffering. She began to bleed, and her bleeding never stopped all those twelve years.

So, the older woman suffered at the hands of many physicians and never got better, but only worse. And the little girl fell into sickness, all the way into death. But sickness and even death itself can be set aside and *must be* set aside in the presence of Jesus Christ. And so it is that Jesus healed them both.

A couple days ago I read this story of the woman desiring to touch the garments of Christ to one of our members, Crystal Ramdeen. Crystal faces major surgery on her leg. It is scheduled for this coming Tuesday. As I was reading the story, it seemed to me that Crystal especially sympathized with the woman's desire to touch the garments, as if she too would feel a lot better about the path ahead of her if she could just quietly touch the hem of Christ's garments.

Well, the good news is that she was able to do that. That is why she seemed so grateful to be receiving the Blessed Sacrament. For in touching the Bread and the Wine, she was reaching out to Jesus himself.

And so it might be for you this week or at some future time in your life. You might find yourself echoing the old lament of Jeremiah, bereft of peace and hardly even remembering what happiness is. But at least this much is true: saint you might be, sinner you might be, but whoever you are, you are invited to mingle in this crowd and to come forward to touch Jesus.

I doubt that many of you know dear old Dorothy Heinsohn in our congregation, for she has been in a distant nursing home for quite a while now. But I think I will always remember her tender love for her husband who had died years earlier. Especially I remember her sighing and saying to me, "Ah, if only I could see my Charlie again for even five minutes."

So it was with the woman in this morning's Gospel story: she had this instinct, this blessed inner conviction, that if she could but touch Jesus, then time and eternity would work out alright for her. So she did and so it was. And so it shall be for you too: through the steadfast love of the Lord in the person of the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth, time and eternity shall work out alright for you too. Aye, more than alright! You are meant to reign with the angels, the cherubim and seraphim, and Him who is lord of all, even Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.