

Jesuit School of Theology
Day of Lament and Prayer, September 18, 2018

Reflection for Tuesday Evening Liturgy
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First Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27-31a

Psalm: Psalm 100:1b-2, 3, 4, 5

Gospel Reading: Luke 7:11-17

Today, during our day of lament and prayer, we have been standing together in solidarity with those who have suffered abuse in the church. We have been acknowledging the painful context of our church. The unthinkable has happened. That for which we often have no words, and that for which we can at times feel utterly helpless, has occurred.

It is important to remember that the victims' truth has been spoken. No matter how angry, or horrified, hearing about the abuse makes us feel, no matter how this shakes our church to its very core. What we mustn't lose sight of is that the victims have been able to share what has happened to them. It is a moment of grace and freedom that these painful words have been spoken, that the victims have courageously unburdened themselves. When the victims, those at the margins, speak their stories, we hear the cry of the poor. Their stories are a part of our story as one body, the Church, a Church in need of healing.

What are also painful are the stories of cover up, or the denial of the abuse, the misuse of power and lack of transparency.

There are no immediate fixes for the current crisis. All some of us may be able to do right now is just to sit with the pain. We need to pray our way through this. And, as we have been doing so today, we might pray with the image of the Pietà, of Mary holding her dead son. For Mary knows our grief and lament.

There is an image from a play that I have found helpful when reflecting on the abuse crisis. The British playwright, Lee Hall, who wrote the screenplay for the film *Billy Elliot*, also wrote an award-winning fictional play entitled, *Spoonface Steinberg*.

Spoonface Steinberg features a monologue by Spoonface, an eight-year-old girl, who is Jewish, autistic, and terminally ill with cancer. Spoonface's doctor tells her stories about his grandmother who was in a Second World War concentration camp. His grandmother was an opera singer, and at night she would sing to other prisoners in the camp. The story of the grandmother captures eight-year-old Spoonface's imagination, and she describes the following:

...and when they would put the lights out – all the poor women on the bunks would think of their husbands who were never to be seen – and they would ask Grandma Bernstein to sing – and in the sad dark she would sing – sing to all the poor skinny women – and she sang all the songs what she knew in the opera – and she sang for the poor people in the bunks – and all the poor people who had died – and she sang for the children of the people to come – and that was very important to everyone, to have such songs to be sung – and then I would play the music and in the heart of it I could hear the singing of the poor Grandma on her bunk – and the poor children who wrote their pictures on the wall – and even in the darkest place there was someone with such a beautiful song to sing.²¹

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In the “deepest darkness” there is a hopeful song for us to sing, even as many of us have seen the devastation experienced by victims of abuse and their families, and the effects on parishes and dioceses.

Yet, in the face of the horror and the sin, there is a song to sing. Songs of lament, and of the need for justice. And, songs of healing, of freedom, and of the courage to speak out, songs that, despite the pain and devastation, speak of hope and of the power of the resurrection. For we have “hope for the fulfillment of the promises of God” (to quote the Vorgrimler passage on your worship aidⁱⁱ).

Today’s gospel speaks of resurrection and new life. Jesus encounters the widow of Nain amid the devastating loss of her only son. As a widow, who would have been financially dependent on her son, she also, in a sense, faces her own death, as she will no longer be able to support herself financially.

Jesus is among two distinct crowds. In the prior scene, the crowd accompanying Jesus has witnessed him heal, from a distance, the son of the centurion. We can wonder what the mood of this crowd was: perhaps energized, awestruck, and hopeful. This crowd meets the funeral crowd accompanying the widow. Proper burial etiquette at the time was a work of mercy.ⁱⁱⁱ The funeral crowd would have contained hired professional mourners, and musicians, and no doubt there would have been songs of grief and lament. In the convergence of these crowds, one crowd’s sense of hopefulness in Jesus, meets fear and loss. While the darkness and grief of the other crowd meets hope, in the person of Jesus.

Jesus focuses on the widow. He feels her loss and is moved with compassion. It may seem strange that Jesus tells the widow not to weep, but this miracle brings to life one of the beatitudes we heard last week, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Lk. 6:21).^{iv}

There is a sense of Jesus slowing down the activity. As he touches the pallet, the bearers stand still. In the middle of the lamenting crowd, Jesus is a calm, authoritative presence. Out of compassion for another, he disregards ritual defilement rules by touching the dead body.^v He “speaks words of life”^{vi} and raises the son to new life. The words, “Jesus gave him to his mother” mark the widow’s new life, and her restoration to the community.^{vii}

This passage reveals, for the first time in Luke’s gospel, that Jesus is a great prophet, the “fulfillment of the promises of God.” Jesus’s actions lead the disciples and the crowds, at first “seized with fear,” to acclaim: “God has come to help God’s people.”^{viii} As with the widow of Nain, and throughout history, “God stands with us, again and again, in our broken heartedness.”^{ix}

In the middle of the cry and the clamor of the current abuse crisis, and the crowd that we find ourselves in, so to speak – the reactions of people around us, and those to whom we minister, the media coverage, the ecclesial power struggles, not to mention our own reactions – in the center of all this, Jesus will meet each of us. Hope meets fear and pain. Jesus offers healing for the deepest of wounds. And we may consider, in this current context, how is Jesus calling each of us to rise and to speak? What does God want us to do as individuals, and as a school community? We need to pray and to discern our reactions. And to reflect on how we can put our gifts to use, including the gifts mentioned in the first reading: prophecy, teaching, healing, and

leadership. For the body of Christ is broken and hurting. As one connected body we carry the pain of our brothers and sisters; we pray that our gifts will serve them, and one another, in the healing to come.

JST students have been considering, and grappling with, the question of what it means to be studying theology and preparing for ministry at a time like this. Our church now, in this painful context, is being called forth from death and devastation to new life and reform. This is perhaps one of the most vital times to be studying theology and preparing for ministry. As theologians and ministers of the present, and of the future, our voices are now more important than ever. We are all called to be the compassionate face of Jesus, and to “speak words of life.” To exercise mercy, by ministering to others experiencing chaos.^x Amid this current darkness, we are called to be bearers of the light. For even in the darkest places there are moments of light, hope, and new life.

Let us keep praying to see how we are called to read the signs of these difficult times.

Endnotes:

ⁱ Lee Hall, *Spoonface Steinberg* (London: Methuen Publishing, 2000), 20.

ⁱⁱ Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992). “The Church is dependent on faith, a faith that is endangered by the deepest darkness. It lives out of memory and out of hope for the fulfillment of the promises of God,” 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (PNTC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 214. See also, Margaret LaMotte Torrence, “Luke 7.11-17, Pastoral Perspective,” in Cynthia A. Jarvis, E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds., *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 1. A Feasting on the Word Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), for reflection on the possible mood of the crowds, 190.

^{iv} Edwards, 215.

^v Edwards, 215; LaMotte Torrence, 190.

^{vi} LaMotte Torrence, 192.

^{vii} Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke*. Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 122.

^{viii} Parsons, 122. Jesus’ actions echo those of the prophet Elijah who also aided a grieving widow and raised her son from the dead. The crowd identifies Jesus as a great prophet, even greater than Elijah, as Jesus raises the man through words alone, whereas Elijah performed ritual actions and spoke ritual words.

^{ix} LaMotte Thomas, 191.

^x James Keenan, S.J., “The Scandal of Mercy Excludes No-One,” *Thinking Faith*, <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/scandal-mercy-excludes-no-one>. “I believe that mercy defines Catholicism. And I define mercy as the willingness to enter into the chaos of another.”