

“Tears... with Interpretation”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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Stewardship Sunday is, of course, the day when we make pledges to the church for the coming year. It seems to me that we make pledges to the church at a time when we are saturated; our world is saturated with bad news. Stewardship Sunday is, as we heard in the reading of Nehemiah, a day of rejoicing, a day of commitment, a day to make a pledge and recommit our faith and our own souls to our faith and the work of church, but I want to use, as a reflection piece, why it is important and for what reasons it is important that we spend some time thinking about stewardship. It has to do with a background in our world of bad news in the context of bad news and bad news stories and why stewardship is such an act of good news and good news faith—faith that God has something more in store for our world and for our church and for our lives.

The story that has caused me to think this week is a bad news story. It is disturbing and it seems to me to be a routine story. We have stories coming out in our world that are all a little different and all a little the same about fallen heroes. We have people who are looked up to in our culture in sort of a hero mode, and these heroes continue to fall. Almost on a weekly basis they seem to crash.

Our hero today, at least a cultural athletic hero, is Lamar Odom. Some of you know Lamar Odom and some of you don't but were introduced to him this week. Lamar Odom was a 14-year veteran of the NBA. He was on teams around the L.A. area for most of his career. He was a star. He was a fabulous athlete. If you heard the story about Lamar this week, you know that he was found unconscious, face down in a Nevada brothel called The Love Ranch which reminded me that, in Nevada prostitution is legal. I had forgotten that. He was found face down on October 13 in this brothel. He had been on some kind of a 4-day binge at this brothel. His American Express card had a charge of \$75,000 on it for this 4-day binge which promised him a place to have different kinds of activities going. You can imagine what those were with two women. He needed two to deal with this binge of his, so it included a 4-day binge of sex with prostitutes, also a binge with cocaine, sexual enhancement herbal pills and alcohol. Not surprisingly, he was found face down overwhelmed by all of this binging.

My overwhelming sense in reading the details of this story, of this fall of yet another hero in our culture, is the image of a man trying to fill up a hole in his soul—filling it with drugs, with sex, with alcohol, with something to numb the pain of his life, something to give him a sense of power or empowerment in his life, something to reinforce his dominance in this world or at least his standing in this world, a hole that he could not fill and that almost took him to the point of death. It is not even clear at this point how healthy he will be, should he recover from this weekend binge.

I think that Lamar's story is a story that is being played out on many fronts in our contemporary world. There is sort of a hole in many people's lives that is not being filled. We try to fill it up with all of these activities and the pursuit of money and all sorts of other things, but I think that is something that is reality for many people, perhaps even for some of us here today. We have sort of a hole that is not being filled. We are searching for meaning in our lives. We are searching for some kind of reassurance and the way to make sense of our world and our lives.

As we read the Nehemiah passage today, I want to do a little work on what was going on among the Israelites, those early Jews, at that time. This is a historical moment around the year 550 B.C., and as you have heard before and you may know, the Israelites, of course, in 587, were cast out and destroyed by Babylon. It was their era of exile. It was an era for those Israelites where they had a hole in their souls. They had felt like God had abandoned them. Their nation was gone. Their holy city of Jerusalem was destroyed. Their Temple was destroyed, and they were cast out into Babylon into a

foreign land, so there was this era, maybe 30 years or so, when they had this hole in their souls. Who were they? What were they supposed to do now? Where was their God? What was their purpose?

Scholars say there was no way to overemphasize this emptiness that the Israelites felt when their God had abandoned them, or so it seemed, so they were a pained people living in a foreign lands, under foreign gods, feeling like they had been abandoned, but they do come back. In Nehemiah, we encounter them regrouping, getting themselves back under Cyrus of Persia, and Persia, if you did not know, is the equivalent of Iran today, so we're back in this Middle Eastern context again. We seem to never move beyond that, but Cyrus, the King of Persia, said you come back. We will allow you to practice your Jewish faith again. We will allow you to rebuild the Temple and just have your little domain of faith back again, so there is this evolving hope that they were getting their faith back.

It is in this passage that Russ read and that I read that we have this moment of weeping because the faith is coming back. What are the components of this faith? We have the story of Ezra. Ezra was a scribe and a priest. He was a person in the Israelite community who would read the word of God. Ezra read the Torah for about six hours. The text says Ezra was reading the Torah (primarily the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) for six hours and the scripture says the people were attentive for that whole six hours, so I will bringing to the Consistory a new form of worship, where we will worship for six hours and be attentive! Now, we couldn't handle that, of course, but in this passage it is an attentive community of faith. They are listening to Ezra read the Torah, and they are having a response to this word that is really quite remarkable. It says this. It says the people stood up when Ezra unrolled the scroll. They stood up. They were in reverence of this word. They said "Amen and Amen" after it was being read. They were rejoicing in two things. They were saying "Amen" to the blessing of God which was being reaffirmed, and they were saying "Amen" to an acceptance of the law, so they were pleased with gratitude that God was with them again and that the law was being lifted up again. There was this double "Amen". They raised their hands in expectation and dependency. They were expecting something great to happen. God was going to be there and do something remarkable so they were filled with expectation and acknowledging their dependence on God. Then, later on in the story, it said that they bowed their heads and knelt in prayer, showing obedience and submission to God and God's law. They bowed their heads and knelt in prayer, then it said they read the scripture with interpretation and made the day holy.

This was a big moment of recommitment for the Israelites—recommitment to God, recommitment to the Word, recommitment to God's law and bring together again this body. The hole in their souls was being filled. They were a people of ultimate despair, and now they are finding glimmers of hope again. It is a lesson for us in our world today. How do we find glimmers of hope in our world when we are a world, because of the 24-hour news cycle, primarily of bad news stories. There is an occasional good story, but mostly it's the bad news that we are shared that comes to us through the media. What was the good news and what is the good news for us?

What Nehemiah was saying in that passage was that Ezra was reminding the people that they have a story to live by. They have a book to live by. They have a narrative and a story to live out of. They have had no story to live out of in the exile. They did not know that God was with them anymore. They thought God had abandoned them. Ezra described, in the reading of this story, and reminded them that "God is with you". The story still holds. The story of faith, the story of the miracles that God has done in our history, the story still holds, so they are relieved and joyous that their story by which they are to live is still there. Ezra was reminding them that this story includes some rules to guide their lives.

We are, in our world today, a little suspicious of rules, very suspicious of authority. We don't trust much of that kind of thing anymore. We cast a questioning eye on the thing that feels too dogmatic, but Ezra was pointing out that, in our world, we do need boundaries, and we need laws to guide our living.

If you have read anything about the development of children, and especially teens, who act out, child psychiatrists will tell you what they are looking for is where are the boundaries. They are going to test mom's and dad's boundaries all the time, and what they are looking for is, where are the boundaries because, for the good psychological development of children, they need boundaries. Children who have no boundaries go on a search to find those boundaries, searches which often get them in trouble, so this story from Nehemiah is about the reminder to God's people that there is a set of rules to live by. There are boundaries which are designed to protect us and to make our lives fruitful. Nehemiah reminds the folks that the God of love is present with them, even in their new situation. They are under a foreign power again, but it is, if you will, a benevolent dictator, and Cyrus, the Persian king says "I will let you regroup", and this text is about the fact that God is present with them even in a foreign land and this reaffirmation that they have a community to live among. They are not alone. The community of faith is regathered.

In that story they cry. They cry first perhaps out of remorse, out of grief, perhaps even out of guilt for the ways in which they have not lived faithfully, but Ezra says don't cry in guilt, grief or remorse. Live a life of joy because God has forgiven you, and God is with you now, so they began to live a life of joy and rejoicing, and the tears are now tears of joy.

So, as I read that story, that is really a promise to us on Stewardship Sunday that, what we can give to is not just lights on and heat on and all those institutional needs (which there are) but to give out of gratitude that God is still with us, that the story is still alive, that the guides for our lives that we find in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are still there, that the God of love is with us, and that perhaps, most of all, we are not alone in this journey. We are a community of faith. We are a community of faith that seeks to be faithful and to grow in our faith, to bring up children in the faith, and to live lives of faithfulness in a bad news world. So our response to that hole in the soul is that God is alive, that our souls will be filled up with the hope of the holy God, and that we will give over our lives and our gifts, and our blessings, and all of our offerings because we are people of gratitude, because God has not abandoned us, and God calls us forward to live our lives in new and powerful ways.

Today, as we make decisions about stewardship, let us do so out of gratitude, knowing that the God of love is still with us and calling us forward. Thanks be to God. Amen.