

Nazarene Theological Seminary Blog

Funeral and Fiesta: Leading Worship in Major and Minor Keys

by Dr. John W. Nielson

Someone said that all worship should include both funeral and fiesta. We tend to be pretty good at the latter, but not so much the former. We celebrate, praise and rejoice, but do we regularly allow time and space for confession, tears and lament? While lament is a dominant theme in the Psalms, the worship book of the Bible, our times of corporate worship leave little room for those who are weeping. We do not often give people the opportunity to express lament, to cry out of the depths to a God who may seem absent. But we must recognize that every time we gather for worship, there are those present who are experiencing sorrow, grief, some type of loss, and who find themselves in the depths. They need to be given permission to express the ancient cry of lament. We do not deny or minimize the worship call to joyous praise, for not only is that fitting and right, but biblical lament is a journey that almost always includes praise (or at least a commitment to future praise). So, while praise is vital, it should not be our only experience when we are gathered together in worship. We need to give opportunity for the full breadth of human experience and to acknowledge those who may find it difficult to celebrate. To put it in musical terms, we need to be faithful to worship in both major and minor keys.

Having studied lament as one of the major forms of the Psalter in college and at NTS, I was familiar with its place and purpose in Scripture. However, it was not until I heard Michael Card speak on *The Place of Lament in Worship* (Watkins Lectures in Church Music, NTS, 1996), that I began to reflect more intentionally about lament as a reality of the Christian experience in

general and, more particularly, the need for it in Christian worship. Thus began a personal journey of reflection and research on how lament could become a more prevalent practice in corporate worship within the local parish. While there has been a resurgence of literature and discussion of the importance of lament within the church, there remains a significant lack of resources for its practice, especially as it pertains to corporate worship. More work is needed to offer pastors and churches the tools to bring lament from something we know we need, to something we actually do.

There is a real need for pastors and worship leaders to work together to explore how worship can reflect both of these moods—praise and lament. We must recognize, acknowledge, and be sensitive to the reality that there are people present in our services, every time we gather, who need to be given the freedom to feel what they are feeling, as well as a language and opportunities for expressing the faith-filled act of lament.

While there is more that could be said on this issue than can be covered here, there are a number of opportunities where worship can include the theme of lament. These are some places where we can worship in minor keys. These can serve as windows of opportunity for us as pastors and worship leaders to lead our people in practices of lament.

First, we can explore these minor keys in some of the seasons included the Christian calendar. Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week—these annual times and emphases are opportunities to incorporate lament in a variety of forms. Sorrow for sin, the emptying of self, offering up sorrow over the loss of loved ones, the sorrow of the cross, Jesus' cry of lament—these can give voice

to moments in worship when “sorrow and love flow mingled down.” These are times where special services, music, themes, litanies, candles, etc., can all be a means to express lament.

Then there are also specific events in the life of the community, nation, or world that call for lament. When disaster strikes, our worship should include the song of sorrow as we weep the tears of the world. This can be done through special times of prayer, music, a picture or video montage, giving opportunities, litanies, and the like.

One might assume that a funeral service would be a time where lament would be almost automatic, but it has been my experience as a pastor and worship leader, that we must intentionally include opportunities to lament. In a day when many want to focus on the funeral only as a time of celebration (which it certainly should be for the Christian), we need to be the ones to give the opportunity to truly grieve. While it is certainly true that we do not sorrow as those who have no hope, then it must also be true that we do not hope as those who have no sorrow.

One of the more difficult times to include lament may be the regular, corporate worship service. While it might not be something that is present every time we gather, we need to find ways in worship to include the language of and opportunities for lament more often than most of us do currently. While we will need to intentionally seek it out, we can find music, reading, art, visual mediums, litanies, liturgies, etc., that will give those who need it a voice to lift up their sorrows as an act of worship.

So may our worship be full of celebration, full of joy and praise. But may we also be faithful in times of silence, sorrow, and lament. May we worship our God in both major and minor keys.