

*Kathleen Billman*

## ***Reconciliation: Biblical Reflections***

### **I. Jeremiah 31:10-20**

I want to begin by saying why I have chosen this text, then reflect on two things that impress me about it. I believe that there is profound wisdom in this text that is relevant to our conversation about reconciliation.

#### 1. WHY I HAVE CHOSEN THIS TEXT.

The text is Jeremiah 31:10-20, a text which juxtaposes hope for the future with an image of almost unendurable sorrow. One reason I have chosen this text is that I am collaborating on a book on the biblical lament tradition and its implications for pastoral ministry.<sup>1</sup> Although most of our work has centered on the psalms of lament, the biblical image of lament that has most gripped us is the one that comes from this text, verse 15: “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children because they are no more” (NRSV).

What the image of Rachel’s weeping first conveys is the validity and necessity of a grief which stubbornly refuses consolation. In Rachel’s cry we hear the grief of one who weeps not only for herself but also for the children who are no more; who remembers all the little ones who were slaughtered—for the sake of the children themselves, whose lives are valuable and are no more. Thus there is a cry for justice implicit in this text. There is something wrong about a world that does violence, especially to those without weapons for defense. Deeply personal grief is woven together with public outrage and stubborn resistance.

<sup>1</sup>My partner in this endeavor is Daniel L. Migliore, and the working title for our manuscript is *Rachel’s Cry: The Prayer of Lament and Pastoral Ministry*.

Fr. Michael Lapsley has spoken about the crucial importance of *remembering* for those struggling to heal from the wounds of violence. The purpose of grieving is to find a way to remember and to live with our memories in a way that affirms life and resists what is destructive of life. There is a lot of literature about what that means for individuals, but in the United States, at least, public lament is usually a short-lived outcry. Paradoxically, this refusal to face death and the horrible grief of what is happening around us may make us unable to receive any transformative new life.

I teach pastoral care, which involves helping to prepare ministers to go into neighborhoods, homes, and hospitals to be with those whose lives have been shattered by loss, sometimes as a direct result of violence, other times as a symptom of the violence with which we have become so accustomed. Thus I approach this text from this vantage point first. I want to listen to the text and learn how the text itself might challenge my first impressions. I then will draw from the work of biblical scholars to whom I have turned to find dialogue partners about the text. But I come to it as one who has already been claimed by something in the text that speaks to what I see in the world of ministry. The task of interpretation moves between the texts of our lives and the biblical texts, and requires many angles of vision. I am eager for you to be dialogue partners with me about this text, from your own vantage points of life, ministry, and scholarship.

## 2. A WORLD OF AMBIGUITY; A WORLD BEYOND OUR IMAGINATION.

My first reflection is about the *form* of the text itself. It is poetic. Why is that important?

Brueggemann describes the language of the poet as “free, porous, and impressionistic.”<sup>2</sup> He writes

Poets have no advice to give people. They only want people to see differently, to revision life. They are not coercive. They only try to stimulate, surprise, hint, and give nuance, not more. They cannot do more because *they are making available a world that does not yet exist beyond their imagination*; but their offer of this imaginative world is necessary to give freedom of action. . . . Poets speak porously. They use the kind of language that is not exhausted at first hearing. They leave many things open, ambiguous, still to be discerned after more reflection. They do not pretend to know the

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 23.

future, but offer the present as a shockingly open and ambiguous matter out of which various futures may yet emerge. . . . Poets . . . trust other people to continue the image, to finish the thought out of their own experience<sup>3</sup> (emphasis mine).

Perhaps we can learn something about reconciliation from the *form* of this text. There is intense sorrow and conflict here, as well as restoration. The text suggests that God participates in this ambiguity, and that ambiguity and tumult is part of the process of laboring to bring new life out of devastating grief.

One of the ways many of us in the United States are most wounded these days is in our capacity to receive ambiguity as possibility and in our capacity to imagine a world beyond the one that we have. As Cornel West has so powerfully described, there is a terrible sense of meaninglessness that exists in the United States. Although it is most immediately evident in our inner cities, our entire civic life is so driven by market values<sup>4</sup> that it has become harder and harder to believe that life has any meaning at all beyond accumulation of wealth and gratification of our present hungers.

I wonder therefore, in my context as a white, middle class, North American if we can ever talk about reconciliation apart from coming to terms with what this process is doing to our capacity to imagine a world that is beyond our sight, that helps us to envision “a joy set before us” (Heb 12:2) that is worth our effort, our struggle, our very lives. Even seminaries and churches increasingly use market language to describe our struggle for survival. I do not believe it is possible to exist in some rarefied world apart from economic forces, but we seem to be so captive to them that even words like “reconciliation” and “unity” sound sometimes more like a strategy for survival of the status quo than a risky process that takes us deeply into the shadowed valley, where our own ways of conceiving what it means to be reconciled and united are often deeply challenged.

The poetic *form* of this text challenges me to remember that since reconciliation is, in many cases, a way of living that does not yet exist beyond our imaginations, it is our very *capacity* to imagine that needs to be healed, our ways of seeing and perceiving. All too often we are simply told, in prosaic and juridical ways, that reconciliation is the great “ought” of Christian life and ministry. But from whence comes this transformed imagination? The movement of the text gives us at least one clue.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 23–24.

<sup>4</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 14–18.

## 3. FROM PROMISE TO GRIEF; FROM GRIEF TO PROMISE.

Notice the *movement* of the text—from promise to grief and from grief to promise. (It is important to note that Jeremiah 30 and 31, with its images of restoration, is situated in a book that is permeated with grief.) The poet's imagination is exercised in the crucible of lament. Images of restoration emerge from the experience of grasping the depths of the devastation that has taken place. The poet does not just *observe* the devastation; the poet *participates* in it.

This text is not an easy text to domesticate. At first it sounds like a pure song of joy, because it imagines the return of exiles to their homeland. It is a marvelous scene that is portrayed, with rich images—singing on the mountain heights, being radiant over grain and wine and oil, dancing. "Their life shall become a watered garden" (Jer 31:12). But then comes this image of desolation—Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be consoled. Then there comes the image of the consoling God, whose consolation is directed to Rachel and whose aim is joy and restoration. Then there is the voice of the rebellious child, then a God who addresses the child with the mother's voice. There is continuous movement in this text; a kaleidoscope of images as ambiguous and tumultuous as life itself.

In the Genesis narratives, Rachel bore a son Joseph, whose name expressed her wish for another son. But she died at the birth of her second son, whom she asked to be called "Benoni," "son of my sorrow" (Gen 35:16-20). That dying wish was denied her and her son was named Benjamin instead. Centuries later, from her grave, she is depicted as grieving the deaths of Israel's children. As Phyllis Trible writes, "Directed to no one in particular, and hence to all who may hear, the voice of Rachel travels across the land and through the ages to permeate existence with a suffering that not even death can relieve."<sup>5</sup>

In the poetic text we have heard this morning, the image of God's comforting Rachel becomes finally the image of God who addresses Israel as the suffering and comforting mother. God is identified with Rachel's grief, transforming that grief into compassion. We are not permitted the luxury of standing outside grief as observers if we are to follow the movement of God. We rather move into the heart of grief to experience God's transforming power.

This word is nothing new to those of us who have heard Michael Lapsley. But I struggle with them as one who lives in the United States. Thus the words are prophetic and challenging, as well as hopeful and reassuring. Perhaps the combination of judgment and grace I hear in

<sup>5</sup>Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 40.

them is related to Dr. Okoye's helpful characterization of the plight of Rwandan Christians as being both "victim and oppressor," a plight which I think applies to me as well.

From my social location as a white, middle class, North American woman, I find myself yearning for reconciliation but reticent to use the word. I have come to be suspicious of it from two completely opposite positions. The first is my position of privilege, which means I am suspicious of myself. So many times I find myself participating in agendas that are racist and classist, wondering why "everyone" does not go along with the agenda. I am grateful to my students, African American students and students from around the globe, who refuse to be consoled with being "let in" to agendas that they have not shaped—who are holding out not simply for personal success in the world that is, but for the transformation of that world into something new. Because in so many ways the world not only wounds but privileges me, my imagination for a new world is hampered by all that I want to retain of this one.

The second source of reluctance to use the term reconciliation is from the standpoint of one who sees that reconciliation is a term that is often used to encourage people to tolerate violence. Women are especially victimized by this phenomenon. In a December 11, 1994 article in the *Chicago Tribune*, Cindy Zimmerman described her interviews with women in Cambodia who had been beaten by their husbands. One woman she interviewed, Sopheap, was beaten with electrical cords and fan belts by a husband who kept a gun in their home. When she finally gathered her courage to file a complaint with the Secretariat for Women's Affairs, the women's rights officer suggested reconciliation, "the first, second, tenth, and almost always last official response to domestic violence."<sup>6</sup>

Until recently, this response to domestic violence characterized the work of the helping professions (including the Church, which often used biblical quotations to justify women's subordination and victimization) in the West. Recent writings have tried to clarify the true meaning of the term "reconciliation,"<sup>7</sup> but the promotion of reconciliation as a rallying point for the Church's mission is shadowed by a treacherous history.

<sup>6</sup>Cindy Zimmerman, "When Life Can Be Worse than Death," *Chicago Tribune*, December 11, 1994:2, 8.

<sup>7</sup>See Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books 1992) and "The Call to Reconciliation," by Pamela Cooper-White in *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 253–262.

Which brings me back, finally, to our text from Jeremiah. The text reminds us that whatever words we finally use to describe what it would be like to be reconciled are rooted in the experience of both facing and sharing the depth of trauma and grief that God's people have endured and are enduring. The words for imaging a reconciled world will spring from those who have walked the valley of shadows together and explored its landscape. And they will be granted their credibility only insofar as they inspire others to that journey.

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