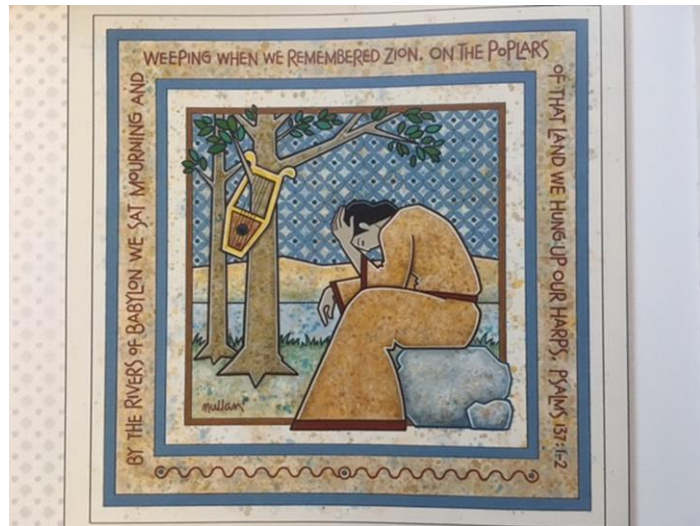




SIEBENQUELL

When I sing this Canticle of Tears



SOURCE: »CANTICLE«, G. E. MULLAN AND JOHN SHEA

By the rivers of Babylon
we sat mourning and weeping
when we remembered Zion.
On the poplars of that land
we hung up our harps.
There our captors asked us
for the words of a song;
Our tormentors for a joyful song:
»Sing for us a song of Zion!«
But how could we sing a song of the Lord
in a foreign land?
Psalms 137, 1-4

A few days ago I brought a spiritual exercise to an end that had accompanied me for months. During the last year I prayed Kaddish for a friend. Kaddish is the Jewish prayer for the dead which is prayed every day for an entire year. Now that the first anniversary of my friend's death had arrived, the time for this prayer had ended. Already on the morning of the very next day I started to miss these words. I felt no relief, but a mild but tangible emptiness.

So I turned, as I so often do, to the words of John Shea. In his book »Canticle«, I found his words to Psalm 137, a psalm of lamentation. These words say everything that I have felt so keenly during this year of Kaddish. Perhaps they will also help you to understand how a person can even miss a prayer of grief, when we understand where this prayer comes from and what it does for us and with us.

»When I sing this canticle of tears –
an expression of sadness so deep
that the only request for joy
comes from the tormentors,
an expression of sadness so deep
it cannot pretend songs from Zion
could ever turn Babylon into home –
I sense the secret purpose of grief.

Zion is not one more city.
It is the spiritual home of these mourners,
the place where God dwells with people
and people live in peace with each other.
When we are not in that home,
when we are alienated from God
and one another,
we cannot sing,
for songs of the Lord
must come
from communion with the Lord.
Nothing can make up for the absence.

But we are always tempted to try.
To live in separation is painful,
And we are quick to medicate hurt.
As soon as possible,
We find remedies for negative inner states.
Time will heal,
we say.
We must make the best
of a bad situation,
we say.
Resignation is our only refuge,
we say.

We transform our theology
into bandages and balm.
God is not tied to one place,
we say.
Perhaps we have lost the fullness of God and people,
but God is present in a foreign land,
we say.

If we sing, the faint divine presence
will become louder,
we say.
Advocates advise that
this practical approach will dry our tears.

But what if there were another way,
a path beyond adaptation to loss?
What is the refusal to sing
is the way Zion is remembered?
What if the harps hanging from trees
preserve our love for the reality of home
and do not let us settle for a substitute?
What is there is a strength of character
that can integrate incompleteness
without letting emptiness lead to despair?

There is a story about a rebbe
talking to his disciples
but not finding them receptive.
He explained the existence of God.
 Not one of them understood.
He illuminated God's presence in creation.
 Not one of them understood.
He spoke of insatiable longing for God.
 All nodded.

The secret purpose of grief:
 Longing keeps love alive.«

That is why I prayed Kaddish for my friend for one entire year, also in the name of his beloved family and friends, who felt this mystery deeply, lived through it and interiorized its deepest meaning: »The secret purpose of grief: Longing keeps love alive.«

Erik Riechers SAC

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