

“Lament for Billie”
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12
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It’s not hard to understand why Billie reached for the drugs, not when you know the full story. Billie’s seventeen year-old father disappeared about the time she was born. Billie’s mother became a prostitute. On the streets of Baltimore, Billie grew up alone, defiant. Assaulted by a neighbor at age 10, her rapist got a 3- month prison sentence. Billie got sent to reform school. She didn’t stay long, escaping to Harlem to track down her mother who was in no position to take care of a child. Hungry and out of energy Billie took the first option that came along – a 50% cut for prostitution. Billie was 14 years old. She was caught by the police and, instead of being rescued from being pimped, Billie was sent to prison. So it’s not a shock to learn that Billie reached for the drugs – the strong stuff. Like many hooked on heroin, she tried to quit many times but instead of getting treatment, Billie got jail time. Instead of *giving* her treatment, the state *took away* her ability to work.¹ It’s not hard to understand why Billie reached for the drugs, not when you know the kind of pain that Billie knows. People don’t reach for the heroin because they’re looking for trouble. Most reach for it to numb the pain.²

Brene Brown in her important book on vulnerability argues that numbing pain is an epidemic in our culture with many different expressions, drug use chief among them.³ More than 72,000 Americans died last year from drug overdoses. That number has doubled in the last ten years. More Americans died *last year* from drug overdoses than died in the entire Vietnam War. Another 88,000 Americans died last year from alcohol-related deaths. We are a people in pain.

You don’t have to have an addiction to know this. Part of being a human being means that pain is inevitable because it is impossible to go through life without the experience of loss. If you are over the age of 70, you know acutely what I’m talking about. The loss of lifelong friends with increasing pace. The loss of physical or mental capacities. The loss of things you’ve counted on for your sense of purpose or identity.

If you are someone who has recently sent your last child off to college you know what I’m talking about. The empty room that matches the absence you feel in the midst of so much joy about a day you’ve been hoping for since the day your child was born.

¹ A 1940s-era “bad character” law was invoked because of her jail time served, to prevent her from singing in any establishment where alcohol was present.

² Johann Hari, *Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs*, (New York: Bloomsbury), 2015, pp. 7-32.

³ Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, (New York: Penguin), 2012, p. 137-141.

If you have buried a friend or loved one, lost a job, been evicted, or you identify with Dr. Christine Blasey Ford not because of your politics but because her story resonates with your own experience, you know what I'm talking about. Even the safest, most privileged life is a study in loss. Pain is at hand. We just don't always know how to care for it for ourselves or for each other.

The Teacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes advises that there are times to weep and times to laugh. Times to mourn, and times to dance but Jesus makes clear that only those who mourn will be comforted. "Jesus knew," Walter Brueggemann writes, "what we numb ones must always learn again: (a) that weeping must be real because endings are real and (b) that weeping permits newness. His weeping permits the kingdom to come."⁴

Billie's endings were early and regular. The disappearance of Billie's father. The loss of Billie's mother to the streets. The loss of Billie's sense of safety and security to a stranger and then to the system that should have protected instead of re-traumatized her. But whatever weeping took place did not receive the support of those closest to Billie. By the time she was addicted to the drugs that numbed that pain, the state was already conspiring against her in its newfound war on drugs.

I say conspiring because, as Johann Hari points out in his landmark book, *Chasing the Scream*, the war on drugs was not launched to protect teenagers from drug use or stop addiction – the reasons that many of us assume. It was launched explicitly by white people who believed that Black, Mexican, and Chinese people "were using these chemicals, forgetting their place, and menacing white people."⁵

An undercover agent planted drugs on this incredible artist who sang her way through the pain just a year after she had managed to get clean.⁶ She was exonerated but by then a life of the world against her was bringing her back down. She turned again to the heroin. At 44 years old Billie Holiday died in a NY public hospital, handcuffed to the bed, another human being who had been denied first the safety and love that every child deserves, and then the place to grieve that loss, a place to park her pain.

After church we'll hear from some talented experts about how addiction is a disease that we should treat as an illness, not a crime. This is a welcome message in a city where deaths from overdoses continue to skyrocket in a nation that continues to treat addiction first as a crime and only rarely as a disease. But I keep thinking about all the people of color who tried to tell us this when their communities were under siege by the drugs and by the law. Mayor Kurt Schmoke whose public

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 40th Anniversary edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2018, p. 57.

⁵ Hari, p. 26-27. Michelle Alexander's groundbreaking book, *The New Jim Crow* also traces these racist roots with a focus toward the incarceration of people of color through the growth of the prison industrial complex. Hari, p. 30.

⁶ Of Holiday, Agent George White said, "She flaunted her way of living, with her fancy coats and fancy automobiles and her jewelry and her gowns. . . she was the big lady wherever she went." (Hari, p. 29). Of his time as an agent in the Federal Bureau of Narcotics he said, "I toiled wholeheartedly in the vineyards because it was fun, fun fun. . . where else [but the Bureau of Narcotics] could a red-blooded American boy lie, kill, cheat, steal, rape, and pillage with the sanction and blessing of the All-Highest?" (Hari, p. 29).

suggestion that we talk about decriminalizing drugs in the late '80s effectively ended his political career at the Mayoral level.⁷ The BUILD organization that fought for drug treatment on demand that was never fully realized. And most of all the families devastated first by the collapse of manufacturing jobs that tore at the fabric of families and then by the drugs flooding their streets to ease the pain. Like Billie Holiday herself, pain is met was met with punishment instead of treatment.

It was Billie Holliday herself who wrote in her 1956 memoir, "Imagine if the government chased sick people with diabetes, put a tax on insulin and drove it into the black market, told doctors they couldn't treat them then sent them to jail. If we did that," she wrote, "everyone would know we were crazy. Yet we do practically the same thing every day in the week to sick people hooked on drugs."⁸

I keep thinking of Billie and the space to mourn that was denied her. The space to weep that was denied her. The compassion that was denied her. The space to treat her pain instead of punishing her for it. There is a different way.

I saw a glimpse of at Turnaround Tuesday, BUILD's job movement program this very week. The morning devotion started with a woman giving testimony to her recovery from addiction. "I was hooked on heroin for 4.5 years," she told us. "During that time I couldn't work, I couldn't be the parent that my child needed me to be. It destroyed my life. I had to get to the root of the pain," she told us. "And today," she told us as her contagious smile waved across other faces in the room, "I'm celebrating 2 years, 3 months, and 2 weeks of being clean."

Her testimony was moving, but not surprising. Drugs are everywhere in our city. I've heard versions of her story before. What surprised me is what a corporate leader present on Tuesday shared after the meeting. A man who's made millions on Wall Street – someone we might stereotype as someone who has been insulated from pain his entire life. "I saw myself in that young woman," he said, surprisingly. "I spent the first half of my life addicted, not to heroin, but addicted to work. And that addiction left my private life in shambles. I almost destroyed everything that really matters. I know some of her pain. She inspired me to believe that if she can recover from heroin, there's hope for me, too."

It's that kind of weeping, Jesus teaches, that permits the kingdom to come. Where a Wall Street addict finds support from woman who left the heroin behind, where a young survivor of assault shares her grief with an elderly pioneer preparing for the great unknown. Where the empty nester holds vigil with those fresh the graves of their parents. And the caregiver finds a place to weep with the brokenhearted divorcee. Where the church treats our pain the way Jesus taught us – with shared tears and lament, the expression of grief that scripture teaches moves the very heart of God.

Ironically, the lament that we denied Billie Holiday, she gave to us in her music. Grief, protest, and hope all bundled up together. Lament, not reserved for

⁷ See this recent article about those times in Baltimore Magazine, <https://www.baltimoremagazine.com/2018/4/20/thirty-years-ago-kurt-schmoke-openly-advocating-for-decriminalization-of-marijuana>

⁸ Billie Holiday, with William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues*, (London: Penguin), 1984 edition, p. 132 quoted in Hari, p. 31.

herself but shared with all of us. Lament that she shared to weep and grieve and rage so that one day we might learn that best way to navigate our pain is to speak it, to sing it, to share it, to shoulder it together.