

START OF TRANSCRIPT

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The following is a message from Wellspring's congregation. Hello, I'm Chris Chepel, my pronouns are she and her, and I'm so glad to be with you preaching today. What are the highlights of my Wellspring's experience has been the honor and privilege of facilitating several of our Wellspring's 2.0 small groups. Wellspring's 2.0 or listening to our lives, as it's known, is based on two simple and also profound ideas. First, that our search for wisdom and meaning is best grounded in our own lived experience, and second, that this search does not have to be a solo endeavor. In fact, doing so in the context of a safe and supportive community that holds each other and care and bears witness to each other's journeys can be truly transformational. Over the course of nine weeks. The 2.0 groups explore a series of topics, including in the later weeks, some pretty heavy ones like suffering, like death. I noticed that when we get to suffering, sometimes people hesitate to share their experiences, they feel their suffering is somehow not bad enough to warrant attention. I and my co-facilitator is try to counteract that by reminding participants before you begin the suffering conversation. That the whole point of listening to our lives is to honor our experiences. That all experiences are worthy and that suffering is in no way a competition, your suffering is your suffering and you absolutely have a right to acknowledge it. Now, this hesitancy to talk openly about suffering isn't surprising at all. There's something deep in our culture that pushes us away from acknowledging anything other than being fine.

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And if we're not clearly fine. We're encouraged to move on and get over difficult things as quickly as possible. I know how harmful and toxic this denial of the reality of our experience can be. I know it in the core of my being, and yet its power is hard to resist. I've noticed this tendency in myself these days. I've started responding to inquiries of how are you with. I can't complain. And I know I'm not the only one who's adopted this as my go to response, I hear it a lot. What I can't complain is shorthand for in my case is this. I've been able to work from my home for over a year at a well-paying job, that in no way requires me to put myself or my family at risk. Others who do not have this privilege have made it possible for me to have pretty much everything I desired delivered to my doorstep. And on the one hand, I'm very grateful for this and on the other. I can't help but feel that I've been complicit in an exploitive and unfair system. Not having school age kids or being a teacher, I haven't been faced with tough choices and compromises about where to focus my time and energy throughout each day. And I'm concerned about my co-workers and friends who have had to do so. Are there people I really miss that I haven't been able to see in over a year? Sure. Am I said that there are multiple people I care about who died this year? For whom there is yet to be a memorial? Yes.

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Do I have any idea how to wrap my head and my heart around the over a five hundred sixty one thousand and counting covid-19 deaths in this country? And the almost three million deaths worldwide. Absolutely not. Have I seen the bright light the pandemic has shined on our broken and equitable and racist systems and institutions. And not yet figured out what I can or should do about it. You bet. Do I feel guilty that I have not suffered more through this crisis? Sometimes. Have I cried about all this and more? Well, yes, yes, indeed, I have. Now, it felt really good to say all that out loud to all of you just now. And I hope you'll consider doing the same to honor your own experience during this pandemic, whatever it's been. You might write it in a journal or have a. So how are you really conversation with a good friend or even say it out loud to yourself when you're alone in the car? If you have a prayer practice, perhaps you might choose to honor your experience in that way. However you do it, this acknowledgement is important, as a recent New York Times article emphasized. The article titled It's OK to Grieve for the Small Losses of a Lost Year by Tara Parker Pope. Explores the disenfranchised griefs of the past year, those that people feel they don't really have a right to mourn.

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The personal stories in the article include weddings that had to happen, virtually lost sports seasons for amateur athletes, cancelled travel and lost time with grandchildren. Divorces, cancer diagnoses, missed graduations and missed job opportunities, among others. One of the stories featured is that of Raeanne Shulty. Who says of her experience? I thought I was lucky I haven't lost a loved one, I haven't lost a wedding or a graduation or a job, I haven't lost my health. So why do I feel so terrible? She continues. I have lost vacations and concerts and hockey games and festivals. And maybe by themselves, none of these things matter so much. Certainly in the face of so much grief and loss, I realize how fortunate I am. But she concludes. What is life, if not a collection of smaller joys? Taken together, maybe my loss is not so small after all. The challenge was unexpressed grief is that it doesn't just dissipate when we ignore it. It stays with us and seeks outlet in whatever ways it can, perhaps expressing itself through physical symptoms, anxiety,

depression or substance misuse. Whatever our experiences during the pandemic have been, they are worthy of acknowledgement. Our losses are worthy of grief. And it is absolutely OK. To not be OK. In this message series, The New Normal or How Not to Waste an Apocalypse, we've been reflecting on what has been revealed during this time of pandemic. As we've been reminded throughout this message series, the meaning of the Greek word apocalypse is unveiling or uncovering.

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So what has been uncovered during this time of pandemic that we might want to take with us going forward, what might we transform for the better instead of reflexively returning to the way things were? I wonder, might one of those transformational possibilities be that we make it OK to be not OK? What would happen if we let go of the toxic cultural norm of pushing grief down and away? Of getting over and moving on. Individually, there is power and acknowledging what we have lost and allowing ourselves to mourn. And there is even more power when we do it publicly, when we practice lament. Lament is defined as a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. That, as the Reverend Dr. Kerrie Fields puts it, is one of the best tools we have for saying together this is awful. Naming, claiming and giving voice to pain is a gift we give each other that legitimizes the experience of suffering. The man's, in other words, involves listening to our lives, to the truth of our experience. Lament has deep biblical roots, in addition to the aptly named Book of Lamentations, many of the Psalms also express lament. Like the song that Jesus quotes as he is dying on the cross, which begins, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? These laments describe a wide array of human suffering with many unanswered questions, asked questions that resonate with me, especially during our current time of uncertainty. Why is this happening? How much longer is this going to continue? And what should I do? In fact, the Book of Psalms includes more laments than it does Psalms of Praise and Thanksgiving.

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And this raises an obvious question, we make joyful noise, in fact, we specifically sing a song called Joyful Noise here at Wellspring's. That originates, in a phrase, from a song. Isn't mournful noise its natural counterpart? Why should joy be allowed, but our grief kept quiet? Lament begins in naming the awful thing that has happened, but it does not end there. There is transformational power in the practice of Lament in making room for. There is the possibility of integrating what has happened. Not a feeling it or removing it. But authentically living into it. And learning what is possible from it. And this is not just true for us as individuals, as history has repeatedly demonstrated, sometimes long term ongoing collective lament is absolutely necessary. For example, active work continues to tell the truth about the Holocaust, the systematic and state sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its allies and collaborators. Even seventy five years later. I have had the honor of participating in a Holocaust remembrance name reading. These are held throughout the US each spring during Holocaust days of remembrance. Reading aloud the names of those who suffered and died in the Holocaust. It brings a human personal scale to what is otherwise an incomprehensible statistic. For me, it was a powerful, visceral experience. It also serves as a form of lament of truth telling.

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This awful thing happened, we need to remember it, to learn from it, to actively work to prevent similar atrocities from happening in the future. And, of course. Only a fraction of the victims names can be read in one day. About six hundred and fifty names can be read in an hour, five thousand in an eight hour period, it would take more than a year, three hundred eighty five days reading twenty four hours a day, straight to read all six million names. It's staggering. And mind boggling and easy and human to want to avoid even thinking about it. The practice of Lament can help us counteract that instinct. In his book, Prophetic Lament, Sumantra argues that our collective lament is also necessary to address our nation's history of racism. He says our tainted racial history reflects a serious inability to deal with reality. Grief and pain related to race are often suppressed and the stories of suffering are often untold. Our history is incomplete, racial reconciliation requires the truth telling of lament. Stories of suffering, grief and pain are often suppressed, Ross says, in favor of a triumphalist exceptional narrative that further furthers the privilege of those in the dominant culture. As James Baldwin, who Reverend Ken talked about in his message a few weeks ago, put it. Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is phased. Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced. In this spirit, they say their names campaign encourages publications and social media users to not just identify victims of police and civilian brutality by the incidents that killed them, but to focus on their individual humanity and use their names.

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Just this past week. Dante Wright's name was tragically added to this list against the backdrop of the ongoing trial of a former police officer for last year's killing of George Floyd. If we were somehow able to extend this list of victims all the way back to the very beginning of our nation's history. How many days, how many years would it take for us to say them all? In the face of the pandemic and the inequities it has laid bare in the midst of the ever growing list of black lives lost to racism, excessive force and other injustices, I hope those of us in positions of privilege and power are able to resist the very real temptation. To jump back into everything being OK and just fine. I hope we are able to make room for the moment and in so doing, hold open the possibility for real and lasting change. I'd like to close with these words from Buddhist teacher Pema Chaudrin, which for me, although she comes from a very different situation than that from which lament emerges. Describe the transformational possibilities of the practice. Well. She says spiritual awakening is frequently described as a journey to the top of a mountain. We leave our attachments and our worldliness behind and slowly make our way to the top. At the peak, we have transcended all pain.

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The only problem with this metaphor is that we leave all the others behind. Instead, she suggests the journey goes down, not up. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward the turbulence and doubt, we explore the reality and unpredictability, unpredictability of insecurity and pain, and we try not to push it away. At the bottom, we discover water. The healing water of compassion. Right down there in the thick of things, we discover the love that will not die. Amen, and may we all live in Blessing. I invite you to join me if you choose in the spirit of prayer. God of light and of darkness, of life and of death, of joy and of lament. May we give ourselves permission to be as loud in our grief as we are in our joy? I mean, we have the courage to tell the truth

about not just the wonderful things, but also the awful things we experience both individually and collectively. May we face them as a first step? In making room for change. May we move toward each other and our common humanity toward the healing water of compassion and toward the love that never dies? For the prayers I have spoken out loud and all the prayers that everyone with us this morning is holding silently in their hearts. We say amen. If you enjoyed this message and would like to support the mission of Wellspring's, go to our Web site. Wellspringsuu.org That's Wellspring's the letters, UU dot ORG

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