



Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Sackcloth and Ashes – A Response to the Grand Jury Report August 15, 2018

“Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.”
Lamentations 1:12

On Tuesday afternoon, the Grand Jury Report of clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Pennsylvania was made public. As I began to read it, I felt what must be the experience of standing in the morgue, having the sheet lifted off a body broken by violence so that the family might identify it. “Yes, that is our brother. Yes, that is our sister,” the family says. And everyone is heartbroken.

The report is a catalog of violence done to children and violence done to the Church. The children are family to us, and the Church is family to us, and we are deeply and profoundly grieved. As Jeremiah cried out over the devastation of Jerusalem, “Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.”

We sit in sackcloth and ashes today, as God’s people have long done when faced with wrongs they cannot make right, with grief that is inconsolable, when seeking to demonstrate a profound need to repent. Our family has been violated, and we are destroyed.

The Bible is shot through with lament. The prophet Habakkuk asks, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence’ and you will not save?” (Habakkuk 1:2) Psalm 74 agonizes, “Your foes have roared within your holy place,” (v. 4) and pleads, “do not forget the life of your poor forever.” (v. 19)

But these same passages always include hope. Lament remembers the faithfulness of God in ages past and asks for right relationships to be our life today as well. And there is hope today, even in the wake of the grand jury report.

Today’s hope includes the Church’s renewed pledge to victims, “We will listen.” And it includes the clear warning to abusers, “We will not tolerate.” In that spirit of hope, please receive this letter as an open door. If the grand jury report has crushed your spirit, call me; let’s talk about that together. If you have experienced abuse within the Church, call me; I will listen. We will lament together, and together we will pray to the Lord, “Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” (Psalm 80:19)

With you in Christ,
+Kurt