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The Power of Mourning:
Creating a Space of Vulnerability for African-American Clergywomen to Lament and Holler

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Abstract

The Power of Mourning:
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By: Tori C. Butler

"The Power of Mourning: Creating a Space of Vulnerability for Black Clergywomen to Lament and Holler" is a project that delves into the psychological effects of grief, the sociological causes of grief for clergy specifically, the anthropological causes of grief on African-American clergywomen, as well as exploring how lament when looked at through the womanist lens transforms into holler. It is a project that explores the necessity of Black Clergywomen of The Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church to have a space to mourn the expectations of what they thought ministry would be, as well as to take off their Superwoman cape and name that there are times when they are not ok. These women during a small group experience via Zoom (a videoconferencing site) were able to explore the power of community, the importance of vulnerability, and were able to give grief a sound (a holler) by connecting their stories to the Biblical story of Jephthah's daughter and her girlfriends in Judges 11:30-40 and the weeping widows in Acts 9:36-43. Thus, the women in this group were able to both mourn with each other and praise God with expectation that trouble does not last always.

The Power of Mourning:
Creating a Space for African-American Clergywomen to Lament and Holler

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Introduction

One of my mentors in ministry is Pastor Juanita Rasmus who, along with her husband Rudy, pastors one of the largest churches in the United Methodist denomination, St. John's Downtown in Houston, Texas. They began the church with nine members in 1992, and it now has grown to about 10,000 members. In 1999, the church had about 3,000 members and a staff of three: Pastors Juanita and Rudy, and a secretary. Pastor Juanita was preaching every other week, teaching two Bible Studies a week, providing food and services for the homeless, working with families affected or infected by HIV/AIDS while working to raise their two daughters, and working to build and maintain a healthy marriage. One morning while getting ready to take her daughters to school, Juanita was putting on makeup in the bathroom when her husband calls out to her and tells her, "take your time I'll take the girls to school today." She was happy not to be the mom in the carpool line putting on makeup. But, while in the bathroom, she felt sick to her stomach. She called her secretary and told her, "I'm not feeling well, I'm going to lay down and come in about noon." A few minutes later, she called her secretary back and told her, "I'm not coming in and I don't know when I will be in. I think I'm going to take a sabbatical or something." She then returned to bed.

That was the start of what old folks used to call a "nervous breakdown," but the clinical term is a major depressive episode.[1] During this season of depression, Juanita, a typically

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[1] According to the *DSM-5 Companion for Counselors,* Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) is indicated by a constant, quite possibly daily "feelings of sadness and loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities. Many individuals will experience loss of appetite, fatigue, problems with sleep, and suicidal ideations." MDD is characterized by "a single or recurrent major depressive episodes." Stephanie F. Daily, Carman S. Gill, Shannon Karl, and Casey A. Barrio Minton. *DSM-5 Learning Companion for Counselors*. Alexandria, Virginia: American Counseling Association, 2014, 38-39.

faithful woman found herself sleeping for 18-20 hours a day. She tried to read her bible and pray; but, for some reason she just could not do it. One day, after an exhaustive effort of trying to get out of the bed and feeling as if she was paralyzed, she heard the Holy Spirit say, "Look at you Juanita, you can't do anything for me, but I love you." She heard the voice in a judgmental tone because she had always experienced God as judge. But God was saying it a different way, He was saying it softer and lovingly "Look at you Juanita, you can't do anything for me, but I still love you." Although, it took therapy, medication, prayer, and meditation, I think the biggest part of her healing came in those quiet moments in her bedroom, where God spoke, "look at you, you can do nothing for me but I still love you."[2]

Pastor Juanita's vulnerability in sharing what she calls "the crash" in both public and private spheres really struck a chord with me. Prior to her I had never heard an African-American clergywoman discuss her issues with depression or publicly name the hardships that come with serving God, serving the church, and serving one's family. After listening to her testimony, reading a blog of a seminary classmate, and reflecting on my own journey I recognized an unhealthy trend: all three of us had suffered from depression while serving God and The United Methodist Church. It did not matter how gifted, intelligent, or anointed we were, this mental health issue negatively affected every area of our lives from our sleep patterns, to our familial relationships, to our relationship with God. Each of us had to discover our own paths to health, wholeness, and reconciliation with God. Additionally, each of us had to navigate the stigma attached to being vulnerable and saying out loud that "Everything is not fine." There are perceived consequences of sharing mental health issues, i.e. being labeled as

[2] Juanita Rasmus, interview by phone Tori Butler, March 29, 2017.

crazy or as a problem, feeling a sense of dis-ease over possible loss of position, or loss of privacy when one takes off "the mask that grins and lies."[3]

Thus, it became important to me to provide a safe place for a small group of African-American clergywomen within the Texas Annual Conference (TAC) of The United Methodist Church to take off the mask, be vulnerable, and to do what Jephthah's daughter and her girlfriends did in Judges 11:29-40, as well as what the widows who surrounded the body of Tabitha in Acts 9:36-43 which is to mourn—to lament, to holler. Lamenting is complaining to God with the expectation that God will intervene in one's circumstances. But, when lament is placed in the mouths of African-American women, it becomes a holler. It is a cry that comes from the depths of their bellies that names injustice and oppression but presses toward a hope that can only come from a redemptive God. Therefore, in my research I will seek to answer the following questions: Why is it necessary for clergy, specifically African-American clergywomen to engage in grief work? What can African-American clergywomen discern about God and their own agency through a black liberationist and a womanist reading of Judges 11:29-40 and Act 9:36-43? What are some strategies that African-American clergywomen can employ to combat feelings like everything is an effort; thereby combating the Superwoman Schema? How can the creation of safe and sacred space for sharing one's story be a place for mourning and healing to occur? The purpose of this project is to prevent a small group of African-American clergywomen from the Texas Annual Conference from silently and privately suffering from emotional and

[3] Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask" in *African-American Poetry: An Anthology, 1773-1927,* ed. Joan R. Sherman (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1997), 64.

spiritual pain by engaging in practices of mourning: lament and holler in order to foster wholeness and community.

The Necessity of Lamenting and Hollering: A Glance at the Statistics

Old Testament scholar, Patrick D. Miller argues that "the laments of Scripture make clear what is present in every human cry for help, the assumption that God is there, God can be present, and God can help."[4] Essentially lament is "the voice of pain and the voice of prayer."[5] When lament is put into the mouths of African-American women it becomes the holler. A. Elaine Crawford states that

> Holler is the primal cry of pain, abuse, violence, separation. It is a soul-piercing shrill of the African ancestors that demands the recognition and appreciation of their humanity. The Holler is the refusal to be silenced in a world that denied their very existence as women. The Holler is the renunciation of racialized and genderized violence perpetrated against them generation after generation. The Holler is a cry to God to "come see about me," one of your children.[6]

By lamenting and hollering, African-American clergywomen can give voice to their pain in order for freedom and release to occur.

This path to freedom and release seems simple enough, yet, there are systemic challenges to wholeness that African-American clergywomen face. The Clergy Health Initiative

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[4] Patrick D. Miller, "Heaven's Prisoners: The Lament as Christian Prayer," in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square,* ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 16.
[5] Ibid.
[6] A. Elaine Brown Crawford, *Hope In the Holler: A Womanist Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), xii.

at Duke Divinity School performed a study in 2008 on 95% of the United Methodist pastors (1,726) in North Carolina to gauge their level of mental health.[7] Based on the results 8.7% of clergy who took the survey by phone were deemed depressed. Additionally, 11.1% who took the survey either online or by paper were deemed depressed, which is double the national average.[8] According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, African-Americans are 10% more likely to report experiencing serious psychological distress when compared to non-Hispanic whites. 9.9% of Black women report that everything is an effort.[9] There is obviously a problem with the rising rate of clergy depression as well as the demands on African-American women. Unfortunately, many African-American women take on the yoke of the Strong Black Woman or Superwoman Schema. According to Cheryl Woods-Giscombe the Superwoman Schema is:

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[7] The study does not take into account black female clergy. 90.9% of participants in the study were white and 74.7% were men. I think this study did a disservice to the diversity of the clergy that are in The United Methodist Church. I believe that this study would have been more helpful if done in a conference like the Baltimore Washington, North Georgia, or Texas Annual Conferences where there is a greater representation of African-American clergy serving. Andrew Miles, Matthew Toth, Christopher Adams, Bruce W. Smith, and David Toole, "Using Effort-Reward Imbalance Theory to Understand High Rates of Depression and Anxiety Among Clergy," The Journal of Primary Prevention, vol. 34, issue 6 (December 2013), accessed February 23, 2019, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10935-013-0321-4#Sec15.

[8] Duke Today Staff, **"**Clergy More Likely to Suffer from Depression, Anxiety: Demands put pastors at far greater risk for depression than people in other occupations," *Duke Today* (August 2013), accessed June 27, 2017, https://today.duke.edu/2013/08/clergydepressionnewsrelease.

[9] This statistic is derived from a chart that measures the percentage of non-Hispanic black women and their feelings of sadness, hopelessness, worthlessness, as well as feeling like everything in life is an effort. "Mental Health Status," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, last modified February 24, 2017, accessed June 27, 2017, https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=24.

(1) perceived obligation to present an image of strength, (2) perceived obligation to suppress emotions, (3) resistance to being vulnerable or depending on others help, (4) motivation to succeed despite limited resources, and (5) prioritization of caregiving over self-care.[10]

Because of this tendency black clergywomen need a space to share their stories of pain and triumph in order to contend both with the pressure of trying to be superwoman while attempting to break the stained-glass ceiling and remain whole. By creating a space where lamentation can occur black clergywomen have the ability to claim that despite the oppression they may face in the church and in the world—in the space they create— they are free; they are whole; and, they are connected to the redemptive power of God.

We All Experience Loss: The Psychological Effects of Grief

All people, even clergy, and specifically black clergywomen need an opportunity to grieve and not simply the loss of the physical body or physical presence of an individual. Grief is more nuanced than that. Psychiatrist, Collin Murray Parkes argues that grief is "an emotion that draws us toward something or someone that is missing. It arises from the awareness of a

[10] Cheryl Woods-Giscombe, "Superwoman Schema, Stigma, Spirituality, and Culturally Sensitive Providers: Factors Influencing African American Women's Use of Mental Health Services," *Journal of Best Practices in Health Professions Diversity: Research, Education, and Policy 9, no. 1* (Spring 2016): 1124-1144, accessed July 29, 2018, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Millicent_Robinson/publication/317601881_Superwoman_Schema_Stigma_Spirituality_and_Culturally_Sensitive_Providers_Factors_Influencing_African_American_Women%27s_Use_of_Mental_Health_Services/links/5942a49645851525f88d62dc/Superwoman-Schema-Stigma-Spirituality-and-Culturally-Sensitive-Providers-Factors-Influencing-African-American-Womens-Use-of-Mental-Health-Services.pdf, 1128.

discrepancy between the world that is and the world that 'should be'."[11] The desire to live into the world that "should be" pushes many of us to fight and resist loss, but loss is a part of life. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler argue that "we cannot grow without loss."[12] Therefore, grief is unavoidable and it has the ability to teach us something about ourselves and the social locations in which we find ourselves. We do ourselves a disservice when we try to mask or hide the emotions that often accompany grief.

In *On Grief & Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss,* Kübler-Ross and Kessler name the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. They assert that the five stages of grief are "tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order."[13] Denial is a state of disbelief. In this stage one wonders how, if, and why they should go on in life. One questions his/her reality. Is it all true? Did the loss really happen? Denial manifests itself through the retelling of the loss or trauma. The retelling is the mind's way of denying the pain. [14] This dismissal of pain often leads to an overwhelming realization of the tangibility of the loss.

The next stage of grief is anger. Anger typically appears in grief when one has discerned that they will probably survive the loss. In this stage anger can be directed inwardly by one

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[11] Collin Murray Parkes, "Bereavement as a psychological transition: Processes of adaptation to change," in *Handbook of Bereavement: Theory, Research, and Intervention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 92.
[12]Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *Life Lessons: Two Experts on Death and Dying Teach Us About the Mysteries of Life and Living* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 78.
[13] Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 7.
[14] Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving,* 10.

believing that they could have stopped the loss from occurring; yet, there is a sense of unfairness that the loss or the trauma occurred in the first place. Kübler-Ross and Kessler further suggest that

> Anger is a necessary stage of the healing process. Be willing to feel your anger, even though it may seem endless. The more you truly feel it, the more it will begin to dissipate and the more you will heal.[15]

The following stage is bargaining. Bargaining is the stage where you would do anything to avoid the loss from occurring though, the loss has already occurred. Bargaining allows us at times "to believe that we can restore order to the chaos that has taken over."[16] Upon the realization that we are powerless to restore order to our lives, depression sometimes sets in. According to Kübler-Ross and Kessler, depression is "an appropriate response to a great loss. We withdraw from life, left in a fog of intense sadness, wondering, perhaps, if there is any point in going on alone. Why go on at all?"[17] Loved ones around you want you to snap out of it but, it is not something to escape. It can be a form of cleansing. However, in the grieving process it is important to recognize that there is a difference between normal depression and clinical depression. Kübler-Ross and Kessler assert that "clinical depression is a group of illnesses that may be characterized by a long-term or excessively depressed state;" while "normal depression is the sadness we feel at certain times in our lives, the common cold of mental illnesses."[18] In other words, sadness is an appropriate response to loss but when sadness lingers to the point

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[15] Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving,* 12.
[16] Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving,* 19-20.
[17] Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving,* 20-21.
[18] Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving,* 23.

where it affects one's quality of life, professional help in the form of talk therapy or antidepressants need to be considered.

The final stage of grief is acceptance. When someone accepts that the loss has happened it does not mean that everything is finally okay and all is right with the world. It is embracing life again as well as understanding

> we can never replace what has been lost, but we can make new connections, new meaningful relationships, new interdependencies. Instead of denying our feelings, we listen to our needs; we move, we change, we grow, we evolve.[19]

Engaging in the pain of loss, going through the five stages of grief is imperative to heal and move forward in one's life. However, the expectations placed upon clergy to perform and be a present comforter often limits their opportunity to truly engage in the grief process. The expectation is that they will enter the pain of others while their personal pain is nominally acknowledged and at times completely ignored.

Unfair Expectations: Sociological Causes of Grief for Clergy

Clergy are continually subjected to unfair expectations. In Kirk Byron Jones' *Rest in the Storm,* he names 35 expectations that churches have of clergy. In the chapter entitled "Naming the Pain," he notes these expectations and responsibilities range from Sunday Morning worship duties, to teaching Bible Study, to equipping leaders, to being involved in local and international missions, to being present at church activities and functions, to being concerned with the finances, to visiting the sick and shut-in, to working with the youth, and the list continues. Ironically, none of the responsibilities include self-care, scheduled time with family, or any type

[19] Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving,* 28.

of spiritual renewal. James Dittes contends that "to be a minister is to commit, unavoidably, energy and passion, self and soul, to a people, to a vision of who they are born to be, to their readiness to share and live into that vision."[20] In The United Methodist Church a pastor's commitment is not simply to the local congregation but there are congregational, district, conference, and colleague to colleague expectations. United Methodist pastors are obligated to attend district gatherings, continuing education trainings, as well as annual conference. Although, many of these events are created to provide a pause in an otherwise hectic schedule, they become one more thing to check off the proverbial list. The result of the aforementioned is that living a life of being perpetually overcommitted is the norm and the expectation for clergy.

At some point, a minister's value or worth is determined by how much or how well he or she can perform. The minister's name and vocation are conflated such that the minister is what he or she does; "so when ministry is thwarted and the minister feels not a minister, there is the emptiness and grief of being a nobody."[21] In other words, a minister's value or worth is determined by how much he or she can perform and when he or she cannot perform the way the congregation wants, the congregation has no more use for them. During one of the small group sessions, one of the TAC black clergywomen described the difference between the treatment of black clergywomen and white clergymen by the TAC when troubles arise within the congregation that impact the pastor's performance. She said that the conference will move "white men quietly" into another position "while black folk they want to give counseling, and

[20] James E. Dittes, *When the People Say No: Conflict and the Call to Ministry* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1979), 1.
[21] Dittes, 3.

label as incompetent." She names a disparity and inequity in the treatment between black and white clergy but, her words name an even bigger issue which is black clergywomen can over extend themselves and not receive support from the context they serve nor at times from the conference leadership who appointed them to serve there. Overcommitment and loss of support create the perfect environment for grief.

We Are Not Superwomen: Anthropological Causes of Grief on African-American Clergywomen

It is evident that all clergy have unfair expectations thrusted upon their shoulders; however, it is my contention that African-American Clergywomen experience greater pressure. They have to constantly prove that they can compete in a male dominated profession. African-American Clergywomen who serve within The Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church have to compete with white men, black men, and white women. They have to prove that they are competent and fruitful (can grow attendance in a declining congregation). They are battling for the respect of congregants who may not have had a female pastor before or an African-American pastor before. They have to break down racial and cultural barriers. They are often given lower pay than their aforementioned colleagues; although, they have the same qualifications or more experience. In black church settings African-American women may have power as the head of committees or auxiliaries but, that power is often challenged by both men and women once the African-American clergywoman takes her authority as the pastor. African-American clergywomen also carry the burden of caring for their own families while balancing the demands of church systems that are often not sympathetic to their personal plights. Many African-American clergywomen find themselves

taking on the persona of the StrongBlackWoman. Chanequa Walker Barnes claims that the StrongBlackWoman is

> Driven by a deeply ingrained desire to be seen as helpful and caring, she is practically incapable of saying no to others' requests without experiencing feelings of guilt and worthlessness. As her willingness to help repeatedly reinforces others' tendencies to ask her for help, her very nature becomes defined by multitasking and over-commitment. A modern day Atlas, she bears the weight of her multiple worlds upon her shoulders. And unfortunately, she is as incapable of saying "help" as she is of saying "no." …Thus, fearful of being seen as unfaithful, the StrongBlackWoman invests considerable effort in maintaining the appearance of strength and suppresses all behaviors, emotions, and thoughts that might contradict or threaten that image. Even as the physical and psychological toll of her excessive caregiving mount up, she maintains a façade of having it all together and being in control.[22]

Where did this burden come from? Why do African-American women, specifically clergywomen feel the need to live into the image of the StrongBlackWoman even to their own detriment?

African-American women are descendants of slaves who experienced the harsh cruelties of the Transatlantic slave trade and then were subjugated to the harshness of the Jim Crow South that disenfranchised them, dismissed them, as well as dehumanized them.[23] In 1776,

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[22] Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 4-5.

[23] Kelly Brown Douglas argues that during slavery black bodies were considered chattel—"to be chattel mean that black people did not have the right to possess their bodies. They did not own them. Neither did they have the right to possess other black bodies, not even those of their

> when the authors of the Declaration of Independence proclaimed that all men were created equal and endowed with unalienable rights, that meant "men" literally and white men specifically.[24]

For this reason, Article 1, Section 2 of the United States Constitution contains a clause called the three-fifths compromise that deems enslaved Negroes (the term used to describe African-Americans at the time) to be counted as three-fifths of a person for the sake of determining taxes and representation of the states in Congress.[25] African-Americans worthiness in society was predicated upon the validation that white men bestowed upon them. Therefore, creating an invisible system of internal expectations, namely, if I do my best, keep my head down, do not make trouble, and do not disrupt the life of white society while doing my part to enhance its productivity, then my personhood would be acknowledged. African-Americans often lived "masked" lives. In *The Souls of Black Folk,* W.E.B. DuBois names the internal struggle to perform and be accepted in both black and white social circles as double-consciousness. He states

> It is a peculiar sensation, double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,-- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two

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children. In this regard, the chatteled black body is not cherished property. It is instead a valued commodity." In other words the bodies of black men and women were not their own and the only value they had was contingent upon how much they could produce. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 53-54.

[24] Paula S. Rothenberg, *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study,* 6th ed. (New York, NY: Worth Publishers, 2004), 437.

[25] Ibid

> warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[26]

Being black in America is its own yoke, but being black and female that is an additional set of issues (for instance, being labeled as angry or aggressive when not afraid to voice one's opinions, receiving lower pay for equal or better work than white or male counterparts). Teresa Fry Brown addresses this tension in her book, *Can A Sistah Get A Little Help?: Encouragement for Black Women in Ministry* when she says

> Though African women were mothers, priests, and queen mothers who served as keepers of the traditions and rituals, a stark feature of African American women's existence has been their invisibility, isolation, tokenism, and exclusion from societal privilege.[27]

Historically when the world rejected African-American women, they found solace in the church. They were able to establish an identity as pastor, evangelist, church mother, deaconess, missionary, pastor's wife, teacher—whatever the community needed them to be. Through their position they could expect or even demand respect. But, even in the black church, the institution where "black leadership, culture, traditions, experience, and spirituality represent the norm, and from which, white, Anglo-Saxon traditions, and expressions are fairly absent,"[28]

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[26] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Brooklyn, NY: Restless Books, 2017), 9.
[27] Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Can A Sistah Get A Little Help?: Encouragement for Black Women in Ministry* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), xii.
[28] Anthony G. Reddie, *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue* (New York, NY: Palgrave McMillian, 2007), 48.

African-American women are still seen as less than and often have to bulldoze their way or use a sledgehammer to break through what Teresa Fry Brown calls the "brick ceiling."[29]

For example, Reverend Florence Spearing Randolph of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church did her best to chip away at the brick ceiling. She was licensed to preach and was ordained as a deacon and elder during the late 19th century. Paraphrasing Langston Hughes, life for Rev. Spearing Randolph was "no crystal stair."[30] She followed the call of God even against her husband's wishes and served the church between 1925-1946.[31] During that time she was appointed to small churches in New York and New Jersey.

> She worked diligently and the churches grew. As still happens today, it was not at all uncommon for women like her to be assigned to a "dead" church (or at least one on life support), where they were deliberately given little encouragement. When their leadership resulted in the church becoming healthy, they were often replaced—as was Spearing Randolph by a young man—and sent to another "dying" place.[32]

This need to "make it happen," that is indicative of the StrongBlackWoman combined with the expectations placed upon clergy create the perfect atmosphere for grief to fester. African-American women, specifically clergywomen have to be bold enough to admit that they are not Superwomen. They cannot be all things to all people without losing their own identities. Where

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[29] Fry Brown, xxvii.
[30] Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son" *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1959), 187.
[31] Fry Brown, xviii.
[32] Fry Brown, xix.

can African-American clergywomen go to be themselves? Where can they take off the cape of the Superwoman Schema—of

> perceived obligation to present an image of strength, [of] perceived obligation to suppress emotions, [of] resistance to being vulnerable or depending on others help, [of] motivation to succeed despite limited resources, and [of] prioritization of caregiving over self-care?[33]

A simple and complex answer to this dilemma is go to or develop a community of African-American clergywomen where members can mourn their current situation by lamenting, hollering, and sharing their stories with women who affirm and confirm that their pain is real and they are worthy—worthy of respect, worthy of position, worthy of support, worthy of being whole.

These communities can be virtual or in-person experiences. Black clergywomen need a means to connect in order for them to know that they are not alone. Remember lament is "the voice of pain and the voice of prayer."[34] Therefore, in these communities Black Clergywomen inherently have access to other Black clergywomen who have had similar experiences of pain and those women can help each other navigate through the pain with words of encouragement, direction, and support. But, if they have not experienced a similar situation they know how to call on the name of Jesus, pray, and intercede with the expectation that their sister in Christ will have victory in whatever battle that she is facing. These communities are needed specifically in the Texas Annual Conference for African-American Clergywomen because

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[33] Woods-Giscombe, 1128.
[34] Patrick D. Miller, 16

out of the 748 clergy, there are only 58 African-American women. Since these women make up a small minority within the conference, they need a space to take off the mask and be vulnerable. They need a space to be able to tell the truth of how they feel without being judged. They need a space to share their story and not be dismissed but embraced.

Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Edward Powell Wimberly suggest that story-sharing is necessary in order to build practices of resilience in the face of adversity. They suggest five primary practices to story-sharing: unmasking, inviting catharsis, relating empathetically, unpacking the story, as well as discerning and deciding a way forward. The practice of "unmasking allows the hiddenness of our stories to come to light."[35] It is being vulnerable and sharing one's story of challenge and triumph in the presence of others. Unmasking leads to inviting catharsis. Inviting catharsis is much like the process of lament. This practice gives people permission to unburden themselves. In the practice of catharsis one is able to "freely sigh, moan, cry, laugh, or express the feelings that arise in the throes of …story-sharing. In these cathartic moments, we express that which requires not simply release but attention."[36] Inviting Catharsis in community incites relating empathetically. Relating empathetically is engaging in story-telling and story-listening. It is the affirmation of "the realness of one another's journey, the significance of remembering, and the need not simply to share our stories. We need to make sense of them."[37] Story-sharing at times also requires us to unpack our stories or revisit them and update them. Sometimes we have held on to a negative narrative for so long, that

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[35] Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Edward Powell Wimberly, *The Winds of Promise: Building and Maintaining Strong Clergy Families* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 43.
[36] Ibid
[37] Streaty Wimberly and Wimberly, 44.

story is the only story that defines us. However, with life transitions our stories shift and change and we must be aware of that. And finally, story-sharing presses us to discern and define a way forward. The Wimberlys suggest that the way forward is found in linking together the biblical story with one's own personal story. Thus, the way forward is connected to "God's unfolding plan and story of salvation."[38] African-American clergywomen can find freedom in story-sharing in community. The community becomes the place where spiritual and emotional release occurs. Furthermore, the community points African-American clergywomen to the scriptures where they can find stories of hope, redemption, and restoration to wholeness.

Learning How to Holler: A Biblical and Theological Approach to Grief and Wholeness

Judges 11:29-40 and Acts 9:36-43 illustrate the power of mourning by sharing one's story in community. Judges 11:29-40 demonstrates what happens when God does not intervene in one's circumstances and how freedom can be found in community through mourning—lamenting, hollering. Acts 9:36-43 shows what happens when a community comes together and mourns—laments, hollers and God does respond. The restoration the mourning produces is not limited to one person, it includes the entire community. An in depth look at these scriptures will show how in the telling of individual pain, the community enters into the pain, and as the pain is released rejoicing and or acceptance of one's situation can occur. I will engage these scriptures through the hermeneutical lens of black liberation theology and womanist theology. Black liberation theology affirms the need for black bodies to not simply be

[38] Streaty Wimberly and Wimberly, 49.

seen as commodities but as somebody. The father of black liberationist theology, James Cone argues that

> Black Theology is a theology of and for black people, an examination of their stories, tales, and sayings. It is an investigation of the mind into the raw materials of our pilgrimage, telling the story of "how we got over."[39]

It is a theology of the oppressed. It is a theology rooted in slave religion that emphasized the importance of being somebody. In Cone's work *The Spirituals and the Blues,* he writes that

> The content of the black preacher's message stressed the essential worth of their person. "You are created in God's image. You are not slaves, you are not 'niggers'; you are God's children." Because religion defined the *somebodiness* of their being, black slaves could retain a sense of dignity of their person even though they were treated as things.[40]

Womanist theology is a theology that empowers black women and confirms their agency in the world while pushing all people toward wholeness. Womanist theologian, Delores Williams suggests that womanist theology

> brings black women's experience into the discourse of *all* Christian theology, from which it has been previously excluded. Womanist theology attempts to help black women see, affirm and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith for determining the character of Christian religion in the African-American community. Womanist theology challenges all oppressive

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[39] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 16.
[40] James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 16-17.

> forces impeding black women's struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women's and the family's freedom and well-being.[41]

Thus Jephthah's daughter and her girlfriends in Judges 11 and the widows that surround Tabitha's body in Acts 9:36-43 engage in the womanist cry to holler. According to A. Elaine Brown Crawford, "The Holler is the cry to right the wrongs, to rectify injustices, and to gain respect for their disrespected bodies. The Holler is the refusal to be silenced, ignored, or dismissed."[42] These women holler until the brokenness that is associated with loss is restored to wholeness. In the book, *Hidden Wholeness: An African American Spirituality for Individuals and Communities,* wholeness is achieved through the sharing of our experiences, in other words through testimony.

> Although public testimony places the individual "I" at the center of the story, it is really a variant of the group's autobiography. Public testimony, telling the story, however painful, becomes a necessary ritual both for catharsis and freedom.[43]

Thus in the telling of individual pain, the community enters into the pain and as the pain is released rejoicing can occur. Does that not sound like lament? Old Testament Professor Ellen Davis suggests that

> When you lament in good faith, opening yourself to God honestly and fully—no matter what you have to say—then you are beginning to clear the way for

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[41] Delores S. Williams, xvii.
[42] Crawford, 82.
[43] Michael I.N. Dash, Jonathan Jackson, and Stephen C. Rasor, *Hidden Wholeness: An African American Spirituality for Individuals and Communities* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1997), 37.

> praise. You are straining toward the time when God will turn your tears into laughter. When you lament, you are asking God to create the conditions in which it will become possible for you to offer praise.[44]

All lament should eventually lead to praise, but sometimes praise is not possible. We see that in the account of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11:29-40.

In Judges 11, we are introduced to Jephthah, the illegitimate son of Gilead. Although, Jephthah grew up in the same household as his half-brothers, the legitimate sons of Gilead he was not accepted by them and eventually was thrown out of his father's household. His illegitimacy deemed him unworthy of his birthright; thus, his brothers denied him his inheritance. In order to find acceptance and belonging Jephthah links up with "a gang of scoundrels."[45] It can be inferred that Jephthah and his friends have acquired a violent reputation because when the Israelites find themselves being attacked by the Ammonites, the elders of Gilead go to Tob where they are and proceed to ask Jephthah for help. It is ironic, that the elders go to Tob whose "Hebrew name sounds exactly like 'the good land,' a common way of referring to the promised land in Deuteronomy,"[46] because it is in Tob, that the Israelites find their promise of salvation through the problem (Jephthah) that they got rid of. Jephthah uses their request for assistance as an opportunity to not only restore his position amongst his people but, lord a higher rank over his brothers.

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[44] Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 15.
[45] Judges 11:3 (New International Version)
[46] Kenneth Barker, ed. *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 375.

The elders of Gilead promise Jephthah that if he helps them that they will submit to his leadership, and he will become the head of all that inhabit Gilead. Jephthah is ambitious; but, his ambition makes him vulnerable. Renita Weems argues that "Ambition caused Jephthah to be so consumed with what he thought he lacked, he lost sight of what he did have."[47] In other words, he lost sight of or possibly never fully knew his own worth. Therefore, he bargains with God, stating if he is able to have victory over the Ammonites (which he does), he offers to sacrifice whoever or whatever comes out of his front door first as a burnt offering. [48] The phrase "whatever comes out of" derives from the Hebrew word, *yatsa'* which simply means "to go out, exit, [or] go forth."[49] There is not a person or thing identified as expected to come out of the house upon his return from battle. But, it makes you think, who was Jephthah expecting to come out of the front door first? Was he planning to kill a servant? Was he planning on taking revenge on one of his brothers? According to Barbara Miller, "the purpose of sacrifice was to win God's favor. While animal sacrifice was an important part of Israelite worship, human sacrifice was considered an abomination before God."[50] Therefore, if it is a who and not a what that walks out of Jephthah's front door, God is not going to get any glory out of his sacrifice.

Imagine Jephthah's surprise when his worst nightmare happens his daughter, his only child comes dancing through the door. She does what any young girl would do after not seeing

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[47] Renita Weems, "A Crying Shame (Jephthah's Daughter and the Mourning Women)," in *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Innisfree Press, 1988), 55.
[48] Ibid
[49] "*Yatsa',"* Blue Letter Bible, accessed January 9, 2019, https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H3318&t=KJV.
[50] Barbara Miller, *Tell It On the Mountain: The Daughter of Jephthah in Judges 11* (Collegeville, MN, 2005), 6.

her father for a long time because he was away from home because of work or fighting in a war; she runs and greets her Daddy at the door. And instead of reciprocating his joyful reception by embracing his daughter, he demonstrates his grief because "when he saw her, he tore his clothes."[51] And after doing so proceeds to blame her for her for his poor decision. Jephthah tells her, " 'Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break'."[52] In the CEB, Jephthah says, "You have brought me to my knees." The NRSV states that Jephthah proclaims that "You have brought me very low." The NLT says that Jephthah declares "You have completely destroyed me! You have brought disaster on me!" In this moment the victim becomes the victimizer. Renita Weems asserts that

> Jephthah projected upon his daughter that which rightfully belonged to himself. Because of his thoughtlessness, it was he, Jephthah, who would inflict pain on his daughter. Yet Jephthah talked as though he was the victim when, in fact, it was his unnamed daughter who would become the victim of his foolish vow.[53]

In this moment Jephthah's daughter puts on her Superwoman cape by hiding her emotions and projecting an image of strength, essentially taking her sentence of death on the chin. She seemingly calmly reacts to the distress of her father. She tells him, " 'My father… you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites."[54] But, in the same breath this woman whose power was

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[51] Judges 11:35a
[52] Judges 11:35b (NIV)
[53] Weems, "A Crying Shame (Jephthah's Daughter and the Mourning Women)," 56.
[54] Judges 11:36 (NIV)

taken away, whose identity was tied to her father and to her father's vow takes away his power by choosing how she wants to exit the earth. She does not want to spend her last days with the one who victimized her. She requests that she and her girlfriends have two months to roam the hills and to weep. The scripture says she weeps because she will never marry. She weeps for her future.

What is significant about Jephthah's daughter is that she designs her own memorial service. And in it she decides to surround herself with a community of women, women who are just like her, women who understand what true sorrow and grief looks like. Weems proffers

> There is a sorrow known only to women; a sorrow so profound and so bottomless, it can only be shared with a woman; a sorrow that only another woman can help you bear. It comes from been violated, betrayed, and abandoned by a force much stronger than yourself. And when the force is someone you trusted, the sorrow can be unbearable.[55]

These women understand that the fate of Jephthah's daughter, could be them. They weep for the loss of their friend. They weep for the children she will never have, i.e. the very thing that defines her worth in society. They enter into her pain. Jephthah's daughter's pain is not simply her pain alone, it is the pain of the community. Through the weeping and wailing of these women comes the profession of the mourning women. The

> mourning women were hired to congregate and lift up appropriate laments in times of death and disaster. They were women who at a moment's notice, could

[55] Weems, "A Crying Shame (Jephthah's Daughter and the Mourning Women)," 58.

> lift up their voice in a wail and arouse others to respond likewise with sympathy and tears.[56]

They embody the experience by wearing sackcloth, tearing their clothes, baring body parts, beating their breasts, and weeping.[57] We can imagine Jephthah's daughter and her girlfriends doing this in the hills of Gilead crying, expecting, hoping that God would change God's mind. And yet, God does not. Perhaps in the space that Jephthah's daughter and her girlfriends created was salvation, freedom, and release. You see Jephthah's daughter could give voice to her pain. She could scream at the top of her lungs about the unfairness of her fate. She could tell her friends of the disappointment she had with her father. She could engage in the five stages of grief: anger, denial, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She could grieve and not be ashamed. She did not have to hide her emotions amongst her girlfriends. She could be vulnerable. She did not have to be strong to make her father feel better. She could reclaim her worth and her name, whatever that name may have been. She did not have to be Jephthah's daughter whose very fate was tied to a man whose ambition killed her.

In Acts 9:36-43, we encounter a woman whose merit is attached to her own name, Tabitha also known as Dorcas which means "gazelle." She is the only female in the New Testament named as a disciple. [58] The text tells us this woman who started her own social welfare program in her community in Joppa has died. The community is mourning the loss because she was beloved. She was good, compassionate, and performed acts of charity. Her

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[56] Weems, "A Crying Shame (Jephthah's Daughter and the Mourning Women)," 59.
[57] Barbara Miller, 88.
[58] Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Luke-Acts,* ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 868.

witness was not limited to the community of women but also to men. So when she became ill and died the community was compelled to respond. Her existence was the difference between surviving and thriving. Her presence determined if folks were going to be destitute or destined. She was an employer and sustainer of the community. She made clothes with her very hands and possibly used her gifts to support the spreading of the gospel. Therefore, when she died and her body was laid in the upper room for ceremonial cleansing, the community could not accept that her death was the end of her story or her ministry.

Remember, the upper room holds some significance in the Biblical narrative. The phrase "upper room" appears eight times in four verses all in the book of Acts according to the Greek Concordance of the NASB. The upper room in Acts 1:13 denotes the place where Jesus' disciples as well as women joined together and prayed following the ascension of Jesus. In Acts 9:37 and 9:39 it is the location of the body of Tabitha. In Acts 20:8-12 is the location where Eutychus fell out of a window and died. According to blueletterbible.org The upper room was "the highest part of the house, the upper rooms or story is where the women resided."[59] It was also "a room in the upper part of a house, sometimes built upon the flat roof of the house, whither Orientals were wont to retire in order to sup, meditate, [and] pray."[60] Therefore, the upper room had significance both for women and the disciples. It was a place to be engaged in communion. And in the book of Acts it was the location where dead people and a seemingly dead ministry was brought back to life.

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[59] "Lexicon:: Strong's G5253-*hyperōon," Blue Letter Bible,* last modified 2018, accessed February 23, 2018, https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G5253&t=NASB

[60] Fitzmeyer, 96.

While Tabitha's body laid in the upper room, the community selected two men to go and find Peter in Lydda which was a little more than 12 miles away from Joppa, and depending on the pace of the men who went to find Peter, the journey could take over four hours to get there.[61] But these men were determined to find him, they were determined to find the man of God. The scripture tells us the men urged Peter and according to the NIV said "Please come at once!" In the NASB they said "Do not delay in coming to us." And in the NLT they said "Please come as soon as possible!" (NLT). No matter the translation, the plea emphasizes the urgency for the need of Peter's presence. And once he arrives at the house and he is taken to the upper room, he encounters the widows. The different translations of the text say that the widows "stood around" or "stood beside" Peter. The NLT even says that "the room was filled with widows." They pressed against Peter. They cried and showed Peter the clothes that Tabitha made. These widows were the indigent in society, the poorest of the poor. Tabitha provided a safe haven for them. Now that their friend, their mentor, their spiritual mother is gone, who will take care of them? These women weep and wail because their future is uncertain. They weep for the one who stood in the gap for them when their lives exploded or imploded due to the death of their husbands. These women engaged in the ancient tradition of lament, crying out and expecting God to respond on their behalf. They stood around Peter and cried out. They were waiting for his heart to be moved to change their situation because if Peter healed Tabitha, they would have their friend back but their livelihood would be restored.

[61] According to Google Maps, it is 20 km between Lod, Israel (modern day Lydda) and Jaffa, Tel Aviv-Yafo, Israel (modern day Joppa). 20 kilometers is equivalent to 12.4274 miles. Using the walking setting, the distance between Lydda and Joppa could take anywhere between 4 hours and 7 minutes up to 4 hours and 59 minutes depending on the route.

However, Peter views these women as a nuisance and sends them out of the room. They are standing in his way. They are hindering him from performing a miracle. It is as if he cannot focus around the noise. But, Peter does not understand that these women, these widows have to make some noise. There is freedom in the sound that they are making. There is power in their voices. I believe it is the voice of their pain, the voice of their grief that causes Peter to restore Tabitha. Once the women leave the room, Peter gets down on his knees and turns toward Tabitha and tells her " 'Tabitha, get up'."[62] She miraculously opens her eyes and takes Peter by the hand gets up from her deathbed and is restored to her community. Richard Longnecker argues that raising people from the dead was an uncommon aspect of Peter's ministry but,

> knowing himself to be an apostle of Jesus empowered by the Holy Spirit—and probably remembering the incident of his Lord having raised Jairus' daughter… Peter responded to the urgent call. Just as he had seen Jesus do in raising Jairus' daughter, he ordered the mourners out of the room and prayed. Then he spoke these words: 'Tabitha, get up' (the Aramaic from Tabitha koum would have differed in only one letter from Jesus' command *talitha koum,* 'Little girl, get up,' in Mark 5:41).[63]

Whereas, Jesus instructs the witnesses of the resurrection of the little girl to not tell anyone, and yet it is recorded; Peter does not instruct the witnesses to Tabitha's resurrection to keep

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[62] Acts 9:40

[63] Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary:Luke-Acts,* ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland. Vol. 10. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 869.

quiet. Peter called on the believers and the widows—the ones who were most distressed about Tabitha's death to see she was no longer dead but, yet alive. In other words their hopes and their dreams were restored as her body was restored to them. The resurrection of Tabitha is particularly impactful because those who were witnesses to the resurrection testified to the power of the Lord Jesus and believed. In other words Tabitha was living into her title as being a disciple by making other disciples through the power of her resurrection. In the same way, when African-American clergywomen have the space to tap into the power of God through mourning—lament and holler, they grant others permission to do the same.

The Project

African-American clergywomen need a place to mourn—to weep, to lament, to holler and share their stories. Depression and burnout are real issues that clergy face but for various reasons many are afraid to address them. Some are afraid of being transparent and vulnerable. Others are afraid of seeking and engaging in professional counseling. Some are afraid that if one is public about his/her issue, the cost could be the next appointment/promotion (within United Methodist circles). Some do not want their congregations caring for them when they accepted a call to care for the church. I understand that I cannot eradicate depression and burnout among all African-American clergywomen, but I can provide a haven for a small group of African-American clergywomen from the Texas Annual Conference (TAC) of the United Methodist Church to share their pain and loss as well as their story—the good stuff and the bad. It is through the telling of their story wholeness and healing can occur.

Although, clergywomen as a whole wrestle with issues of depression, burnout, and stress; there is little research that exists on African-American clergywomen and mental health. I

specifically focused on African-American clergywomen in the TAC not just because they wrestle with the pressure of taking on the yoke of the Superwoman Schema but, because of their involvement in a predominately white denomination in the south. The TAC has 746 active clergy, 246 are women and only 58 are black clergywomen.[64] The TAC is composed of nine districts and it takes about six and a half hours in driving from the top of the conference to the bottom of the conference. Thus I tried to choose African-American women from various places within the conference, various age groups, as well as various lengths of service. I performed qualitative research. I used to the online tool SurveyMonkey.com to disseminate questionnaires via email. I sent out a pretest questionnaire to nine African-American clergywomen. The pretest questionnaire asked demographical information (age, how many years in ministry, ordained or not, etc.) in addition to questions surrounding hardships they have experienced due to race and gender. I also tried to gauge if members of the group feel that everything is an effort, their level of ministerial support, engagement with mental health professionals, as well as topics that the group would be interested in covering in their time together.

Following the questionnaire I facilitated four sessions with these women, three via the video conferencing site, Zoom and one in person session that included two members of the group video conferencing in because of the distance of the meeting. The sessions were structured: Check-in time (members of the group were given an opportunity to share joys and concerns), Centering time (music was played and participants were invited into breathing exercises, moments of reflection on the lyrics of the song, and prayer), Reflection on the

[64] Nancy Slade, Administrative Assistance Office of Clergy Excellence TAC, e-mail message to the author, January 30-31, 2019.

Scripture text (Judges 11:29-40 and Acts 9:36-43), and Engagement of the topic of the day. The two topics we focused on were: Have you grieved your expectations of what you thought ministry would be? And Are you Black Superwoman? The purpose of the first two sessions was to get the African-American clergywomen to name that they had experienced grief while serving God and the church. I wanted them to name the tension between what they expected ministry to be versus the reality of what ministry actually was. The third session was a pivotal one. Members of the group were introduced to Ellen Davis' interpretation of lament before delving into Acts 9:36-43. After, discussing the importance of being in relationship with one another in times of trouble, these women were pushed to think about how they often respond in times of trouble like superwoman. Yet, in this case being superwoman was not something to be proud of. The invisible cape that many or all have worn at some point in the journey of life and ministry was a metaphor for the characteristics of the Superwoman Schema. Many campaigned that the cape needed to be burned; yet in the same instance many of the participants forgot that they responded to yes and sometimes to the characteristics of the Superwoman Schema. The strategies given to combat the Superwoman Schema were:

- Don't be afraid to holler.

  "Holler is the primal cry of pain, abuse, violence, separation. It is a soul-piercing shrill of the African ancestors that demands the recognition and appreciation of their humanity. The Holler is the refusal to be silenced in a world that denied their very existence as women. The Holler is the renunciation of racialized and genderized violence perpetrated

against them generation after generation. The Holler is a cry to God to "come see about me," one of your children."[65]

- Take the time to engage in the 5 steps of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.
- Cultivate new Community- Do not silently suffer without saying something.
- Invite other sisters to mourn, to weep with you.

Then we brainstormed as a community how we could combat the Superwoman Schema collectively and individually. The final session was in-person where stories were shared. Tears were cried, heartache was given a name, worship occurred, laughter rang, and support was felt.

After the experience of the four sessions a posttest questionnaire was given. This questionnaire assessed the level of the effectiveness of the use of technology, did the participants feel like they gained a sense of community, the importance of mourning, and further engagement with the scripture text.

Results

The following are the results of my project. Nine participants answered the pretest questionnaire. The demographics of the participants are as follows. The youngest was 33 and the oldest was 66. The median age of the participants was 52. The average combined number of years served in pastoral ministry was 12 years. They served across the nine districts of the TAC as pastors as well as in extension ministry (ministry beyond the local church). Eight of the participants were ordained elders and only one was a licensed local pastor. All named challenges associated with the path to licensure and ordination. One respondent spoke of not

[65] Brown Crawford, xii.

being adequately prepared to talk about Methodist theology and doctrine. Another talked about being delayed because of the dislike of board members for her home church pastor. Another discussed being delayed for difficulty in being able to explain baptism while her male counterpart who had a similar issue was passed. Another discussed leaving for seminary and being a part of one district and returning from seminary and being a part of another one, and the issues of being vulnerable in front of a new group of people. Another participant spoke of how the ordination system at one time was not as streamlined as the current process; thus, different people had different answers on the process, in essence chaos.

When asked to describe their current appointment only one said that they were a part of a vibrant and growing congregation. Six said they were a part of a congregation that was aging and in need of resurrection. Over 90 years after Reverend Florence Spearing Randolph's ministry, black clergywomen are still faced with the burden of making an appointment work which is indicative of the experience of eight participants. One respondent commented that

> Each appointment demands certain gifts and graces and calling. I am not sure how effectively we match pastors with the needs of the church or if there is a way faithfully and earnestly do that. So, you take what you get and make the best of it, even if it is not a good fit for you or the church.[66]

Again you make it work, even if your pastoral authority is challenged because of race or gender or both. You make it work even if opportunities for upward mobility is limited because despite the system, God has called you.

[66] Survey 1 Respondent#7, page 1

Despite their calling and anointing, the support for the black clergywomen in the TAC has been mixed. Majority of the women felt that there were colleagues that they could reach out to, to be vulnerable with, and share their burdens. Yet, one communicated that everything felt like an effort. This one is representative of the Office of Minority Health's report that states 9.9% of African-American women feel this way. While others encountered both support and non-support. One respondent stated "There are times that I feel that there is no support but I have learned to pick up the phone and make that call." Another respondent is in the middle of a time in her life where she needed multilevel support. She has experienced five traumatic deaths since July 2018 as well is concerned with the care of her aging parents. She said did and did not feel supported. She stated

> When I realized that I was not recovering and not in a good place, I notified my church and DS. My DS encouraged me to call the Clergy's Excellence Director at the conference office to get guidance. I did not feel supported, at any level. I had to go through extensive paper work and to wait for approval at all three levels before I could take time off and away to heal.[67]

The Book of Discipline, The United Methodist Bible of process and procedure offers clergy different types of leave in times of crisis, as well as in time of renewal, or further education. But each annual conference has its own ways to execute those leaves. The aforementioned respondent was following the protocol to start the process to enact the leave she needed; however, the barriers that were put in place for her added to her crisis and did not help to

[67] Survey 1 Respondent#7, page 1

alleviate it. This is the challenge that some StrongBlackWomen face, when they finally say, “I need help,” it is a fight to actually get it.

When these women finally disclose that they need help, issues like anxiety and depression are revealed. Seven out of the nine participants admitted that they have suffered from anxiety and depression. That is 77.78% of participants in the survey. The Duke Study on clergy anxiety and demands does not reflect these results. All participants divulged that they had attended sessions with a therapist. Three admitted to currently being in therapy. They all had to discover their own path to healing. An inferred path to healing through the survey was crying. All admitted to crying. This is what they said about crying: “when my heart is torn with grief and disappointments;” “It takes quite a bit to get me to the point of tears but when it does I cry or go to a movie;” and finally, “I don’t know that I can get a time frame but lately its more than usual.” These women may not be publicly crying but they do make space to weep in their lives.

Having an opportunity to be vulnerable is essential for these women. They wanted the small group experience to be a place where “we all take our masks off and get naked before God.” They hoped it would be a place of fellowship, advice, and most importantly a safe environment. They wanted a space where they did not have to pay dues or kiss the proverbial ring but be, be in community, be with sisters who experienced similar issues, and get support for the journey. I wanted to provide that support as well as opportunities for these women to grieve and delve into topics that may have interested them outside of the two topics outlined for the four sessions: Have you grieved your expectations of what you thought ministry would be? And Are you Black Superwoman? But, due to time constraints of this project and the

healthy discussion around the aforementioned topics we could not explore other topics of interest. Yet, there is an understanding that the group formed will continue the work. We will continue to meet, be vulnerable, lament, and holler together.

After the four sessions were completed participants were sent out a posttest questionnaire. Seven participants completed it. On average respondents attended three of the four sessions. They enjoyed the format of the sessions: check-in, centering time, reflection on the scripture, and reflection on the topic. Three out of the four sessions were held via the videoconferencing site, Zoom. All respondents said that using Zoom was easy. However, as the person who was administering the technology, it had its challenges. Many were not familiar with using it and did not always know how to mute themselves. If the participant had a week internet connection, they would freeze on the screen. And during the final session where participants met in-person with two people participating on Zoom, the technology failed completely. The two that were able to use Zoom could see and hear each other. We could see them but they could not hear us, despite working with a technology person on site, the program could not be resolved. Despite the technology issues, the group felt like they could be transparent with one another. This was affirming to me as the facilitator that those chosen to participate where a good fit for this group work.

The posttest questionnaire explored their engagement with Judges 11:29-40 and Acts 9:36-43. Question 5 inquired “What new revelation about God/your agency/the pericope did you learn from Judges 11:29-40?” These were their responses:

- We need to be careful with our use of words because they can have profound repercussions.

- Vows to God are very serious. One can become a casualty from someone's vow to God. We really have to take some formal time to grieve when warranted. Friends can help one grieve in wholesome ways when making the best of a really bad situation.
- The importance and power was affirmed for me to ask for what I need in the context of decisions being made that I have vowed to accept by others (authority figures). Though I may embrace them, I have agency to express my needs and an expectation that my requests will be respected and honored.
- His constant presence in the midst of any trial or situation. The text was reassuring.
- I learned that we have been sacrificing ourselves for ministry sake for a very long time. I decided that I will continue to take care of me, and use discernment in ways that I never imagined, when it comes to sacrificing.
- Take time to grieve critical changes.
- I learned the importance of sisterhood - women rising together to support one another. Being present is key

Question 6 asked “What new revelation about God/your agency/the pericope did you learn from Acts 9:36-43?” The respondents replied:

- The women prepared for a miracle inspite of what they saw and felt. Their trust in God was greater than their situation.
- Tabitha had been such an amazing disciple, that the male disciples in Lydda called for Peter, who knew how to pray, to come with urgency! Men called for help for a dead woman! She was amazing! She was leaving a powerful legacy of love, just like Jesus!

- Given that I experienced so many deaths in 2018, the most significant for me was, when death occurs, there is power in grieving in a supportive community of shared experiences; and the legacy, tangible and/or intangible, that one leaves is what will help or hinder the grieving process.
- Look beyond what meets the eye.
- I love the story about Dorcas. My name is Tabitha and I admire her strength and selflessness. I encouraged myself, after this session, to keep on "Getting Up!"
- Get up! Be Alive Again. Believe in God for resurrection is now!
- I leaned that as women we wear many hats and especially as a clergy there are obstacles we face but we should feel free enough to express our needs.

After reading about Jephthah's daughter and her girlfriends and the widows that surround the body of Tabitha and how they lamented and hollered about their circumstances, I wanted the participants to answer the following question, "Did you find sharing your story cathartic?" All affirmed that it was and further comments were:

- Being able to speak openly and honestly about my truth and struggle with people who could hear, relate, love support and encourage was just what I needed to help me process and navigate my own healing journey. I was able to be vulnerable, authentic and transparent without fear of judgment, rejection or exploitation. I felt empowered to be real.
- Yes...it is good to have others offer a different view or lifting you up in prayer and concern in private and confidential space.

- Yes. Sharing my story helped me unpack my thoughts and fears in more ways than one. I truly enjoyed sharing my story.

Since the goal was to create a space where African-American Clergywomen from the TAC could not only build community but be vulnerable enough to mourn— to lament and holler, the next two questions were crucial in determining if the project was successful. They were "Did you feel a sense of community and support from the group?" and "What new insight about yourself or the Black Clergywomen of the TAC, if any did you receive through your interaction with the group members?" 100% of the participants answered the first question with a yes. They further commented that

- It was great to come along side my sisters and remind them that they are not alone.
- Yes. As stated above, I felt listened to, heard, understood, supported, encouraged and affirmed. It was liberating.
- Absolutely. For me, listening to others who have been where I desire to go, helped me in my walk with God and in my profession. It was great to listen and learn. I have not been able to do that in a while.
- Trusting the process and being present with these sisters was a truly blessing of community.
- Yes, everyone one shared which allowed me to be comfortable. The no judgement zone made me feel like a community.

Therefore, the group wants to continue to meet, both in-person and virtually. There is more we can learn from each other and more support we can provide.

Conclusion

In conclusion after four sessions of exploring the questions: “Have you grieved the expectations of what you thought ministry would be?” and “Are you black superwoman?”, it is evident that there is power in mourning as the African-American clergywomen of the TAC delved deeper into the practices of lament and holler. They were able to fully grasp that lament is complaining to God and expecting God to respond to your problem or your pain. Through lament they were able to give voice to their pain and communicate to God through prayer. And yet, understand that lament does not leave us in a place of pain but pushes us toward praise. The women learned that lament put into the mouths of African-American women becomes a holler. The holler is a sound not only filled with emotion but, it is the cry that comes out of the depths of black women’s bellies. It demands to be heard. It brings to light injustice- racialized and genderized violence. It is a cry to God to be “the ever present help in the time of trouble.” For so long this cry has been stifled. Many of these women have been silently suffering with issues of anxiety and depression, because carrying the yoke of the StrongBlackWoman or the Superwoman Schema has held them hostage and prevented them from asking for help. Therefore these women need spaces to be vulnerable and to engage in the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These women need a place to name the pain associated with the inability to fulfill unfair expectations thrusted upon their shoulders due to their profession as pastors, their denominational and conference affiliation, as well as personal and familial demands.

The African-American Clergywomen of the TAC need a place to take off the mask and engage in story-sharing: unmasking, inviting catharsis, relating empathetically, unpacking the

story, as well as discerning a way forward. These women need a reminder that within the Biblical narrative that they can locate stories of pain and redemption just like theirs. For instance in Judges 11:29-40 Jephthah's daughter is sentenced to death by the foolish vow of her father but finds comfort within the community of girlfriends who mourn—lament and holler with her about the injustice of her fate. Jephthah's daughter's girlfriends understand that it could happen to them too. This narrative lets the African-American clergywomen of the TAC know that moments of unfairness and injustice may arise in your life and ministry but there is a sister on the journey who will enter into your pain, and her presence will demonstrate that we serve a God that does not leave us alone in the midst of trials and tribulations. Additionally, black clergywomen can examine the story of the resurrection of Tabitha in Acts 9:36-43 and become aware of what happens when the African-American clergywomen of the TAC band together, pray, cry out, lament, and holler. Things (structures and systems) can begin to change because the evidence is when the widows who are in the upper room surround Tabitha's body, holler, and press into Peter, Peter responds by resurrecting Tabitha. It is through the resurrection, the redemption of one that all can experience victory. Thus, through the community that was created via Zoom the African-American clergywomen felt safe to be vulnerable, safe to explore how to take off their superwoman capes, and experience the support and encouragement from women who have experienced their pain. As they learned how to mourn—to lament and to holler they became free and were able to experience wholeness. In the sharing of their personal pain, the personal pain became the communal pain. However, when the pain morphed into praise there were other women waiting to praise God

with them. But, when the pain could not turn to praise, there was someone there reminding them that there was hope that one day it would.

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Appendix

1. Name

2. Age

3. How many years have you been serving in pastoral ministry in the United Methodist Church?

4. Are you ordained or licensed?

- Ordained
- Licensed

5. How would you describe your licensing or ordination process?

- easy
- difficult
- challenging but not difficult

Please explain your answer

6. How many appointments have you had?

7. How many districts have you served in? If more than one list them.

8. Describe your current appointment

- ◯ Vibrant and growing congregation
- ◯ Dead
- ◯ Aging and in need of resurrection
- ◯ I am in extension ministry.

Other (please specify)

9. Have you ever felt the burden to make an appointment work?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Please Explain

10. Has your authority ever been questioned because of your gender?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Please Explain

11. Has your authority ever been challenged because of your race?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Please Explain

12. Have you ever felt like your options for upward mobility have been limited because of your gender or race or both?

Yes No

Please Explain

13. Do you currently feel overwhelmed?

Yes No

Please explain

14. When you do feel overwhelmed do you feel comfortable sharing with colleagues?

Yes No

Please Explain

15. Do you feel like everything in life is an effort?

Yes No

Please Explain

16. Do you currently feel supported?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Please Explain

17. Have you ever suffered from depression or anxiety?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

18. Have you ever attended sessions with a therapist?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

19. Are you currently in therapy?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

20. How often do you cry?

- ◯ Never
- ◯ Once a month
- ◯ Once a week
- ◯ Once every 3 months
- ◯ Other (please specify)

21. Do you have people that you can be vulnerable with?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

22. Do you want to be more vulnerable with your colleagues?

Yes

No

Please Explain

23. What are some expectations you have for our small group experience?

24. What are some topics that you are interested in discussing, i.e. impact of moving on clergy and families, support/non-support of other clergywomen, challenge of marriage and ministry, stained-glass/ brick ceiling, or a topic of your choice? Please share.

Power of Mourning: Survey 2

1. How many sessions did you attend?

2. Did you enjoy the format of the sessions (check-in, centering time, reflection on scripture, and reflection on topic)?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

If you have any comments or suggestions, please enter below.

3. How would you describe using Zoom?

- ◯ Easy
- ◯ Challenging but not difficult
- ◯ Difficult

If you have any comments or suggestions, please enter below.

4. Did you feel safe being transparent with the group?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Please comment below.

5. What new revelation about God/your agency/ the pericope did you learn from Judges 11:29-40?

6. What new revelation about God/ your agency/ the pericope did you learn from Acts 9:36-43?

7. In Sessions 1 & 2, the question, "Have you grieved your expectation of what you thought ministry would be?" was posed. Do you think it is important for black clergywomen to grieve?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Why?/Why not?

8. In Sessions 3 & 4, we explored the question, "Are you Black Superwoman?" were you able to name the aspects of your life that you carry around as your cape? If so, what are they?

9. Did you find sharing your story cathartic?

10. Did you feel a sense of community and support from the group?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Please explain your answer

11. What new insight about yourself or the Black Clergywomen of the TAC, if any did you receive through your interaction with the group members?

12. Would you like to continue to meet?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

13. Did you prefer the online format, in person format, or mixture of both for the small group work?

- ◯ Online Format
- ◯ In Person Format
- ◯ Mixture of Online and In Person

Please explain your answer.