

Sighs Too Deep for Words Romans 8:26-39

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost/ 26th July 2020

When I saw that the Romans 8 text was part of this week's lectionary, I was grateful. The apostle Paul's sublime words to the fledgling church in Rome, especially verses 31 through 39 are often read at funerals. "If God is for us"—and God is for us then—"who is against us?" Who can bring any charge against God's elect? Not God, for God justifies, God puts us in the right. Who is to condemn? Not Christ, because Christ intercedes for us. Who, what, then, will separate us from the love of Christ? Can hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword or anything? The clear, resounding answer is, *No*. Nothing is strong enough, not even death, not even nothingness; nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And that's because Christ is with us and Christ is for us (Rom. 8:31-39).

I love this passage. But my gratitude this week is that I got to spend time with what comes before these verses. We might say that the last verses of chapter 8, verses 31 through 39, ground or anchor the work of the Spirit, that is, they direct and empower the Spirit's work. If nothing can separate us from God, that means the Spirit is with us and on our side. John's Gospel calls the Holy Spirit a comforter and advocate (John 14:16, 26). Paul says something similar, maybe even a little deeper. Paul shows us that the Spirit is actively present at work within us, searching our hearts, helping us, especially when we are weak and tired. This is why I am grateful.

Paul reminds us that the Spirit helps us when we are weak and unsure about things. And we are often weak and unsure about many things. So weak we can't even pray. When we can't pray the Spirit is at work in us interceding to God with sighs too deep for words (Rom. 8:26)—that's the word that I need to hear these days. Nowhere else in scripture are we given such an intimate portrayal of the Holy Spirit moving within our hearts and working on our behalf. Three times in chapter 8 Paul stresses the fact that the Spirit is interceding, "interceding for the saints"—meaning *us*— "according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:27).

With sighs too deep for words. There are times when words fail and we don't know how to pray, when emotions are tender and raw, when we feel alone or afraid or sad and we don't know how to pray. Moments of overwhelm, when it's all just too much. We feel we ought to pray, want to pray but can't, or don't even know what to pray for anymore or where to begin or doubt its effectiveness.

We, as a congregation, have been through a lot this past week and it will take time for us to sort through our feelings. And we face this loss at a time when we are surrounded by pain and loss and death, nearly 150,000 COVID-19 deaths since March (many of which could have been prevented) and chilling estimates of where we will be if people don't take the pandemic seriously. The daily news just gets worse, incompetent leadership causes untold pain and suffering, divisions are increasing, rising unemployment, economic instability, parents are worried for their children as a new school year begins. You know what I mean. *Overwhelmed*. How do we begin to pray?

I take comfort in knowing that the Spirit is praying in us and through us deeper than our words or lack thereof. There are times when the only thing we can summon within us are our sighs and groans for something more, something different. You know they are there, just below the surface. You can feel them in the chest or in the throat. You know they're there, these sighs and groans, these feelings that sit there just below the surface, deeper than words, too painful or scary to say, to verbalize, but we feel them. Our sighs are good enough, more than enough. And there are times our sighs and groans are holy, and when offer them up to the Lord. We can trust their efficacy because the Spirit is at work in them, at work deep in us, interceding on our behalf, sharing our sighs and giving expression to what is deeper than words. Even the Spirit cannot find the words to pray for us or maybe the Spirit doesn't need words. The Spirit sighs and groans and cries and conveys to God what needs to be communicated to God and works on our behalf, working together with "all things" for good, our good, and the good of the world (Rom. 8:28).

I guess another way to say what Paul is getting at here is that the good news of the gospel means we can rest in the Lord and we can fall, even collapse into his arms, release the worries and cares and concerns and anxieties that fill our lives and remember that there's nothing that can separate us from God's love.

In today's Musical Offering Greg Knauf will play Johannes Brahms' (1833-1897) Intermezzo in A major (Opus. 188, No.2). It's about five minutes long, moving, beautiful, poignant. I invite you to listen to it as a kind of prayer without words, may you fall, fall into it and allow it to flow through you and free you to release what is too deep for words in you today.

For the good news is that we can collapse into the arms of our good shepherd (Jn. 10:11-18), who holds us with a love that will never let us go.¹ Held in that love we are free to sigh knowing the Spirit is sighing with us. Some days that's all we need to know.

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¹ This is an allusion to George Matheson's (1842-1906) beautiful poem, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go." The hymn by this name was first introduced in the Church of Scotland monthly magazine, *Life and Work*, in January 1883.