

SERMON: Sighs Too Deep for Words
TEXT: Romans 8:26-39

7-26-2020

My grandfather on my mother's side was a grouchy old man. At least, that's how I remember him. The times I ever saw him smile or laugh were few and far between. Probably because I was a child, and he didn't seem to care much for children. In the summer, when my aunt and cousin would come to visit from California, and my grandmother would invite all the other aunts, uncles, and cousins to spend the day, my grandfather was always absent. Apparently there was a cabin somewhere to which he would escape. To my knowledge, he didn't fish or hunt. All I knew about him was that he would yell at us kids if we were too noisy; he cussed more freely than anyone else I ever knew; he enjoyed completing the word jumble in the newspaper every day; he liked to read Reader's Digest Condensed Books; his favorite gift for Christmas or his birthday was a bottle of Peppermint Schnapps; and he liked to sit in his rocking chair, smoke a cigarette, drink coffee, and watch sports on TV. I never saw him hug or kiss anyone. I never heard him say, "I love you," to anyone. I don't remember ever having a conversation with him. To his credit, however, his bark was worse than his bite. In fact, I'd say he was all bark and no bite. But I was afraid of his bark, and I avoided him as much as he avoided most people.

One thing that was amusing, though, was that my Grampa used to talk back to the television. Especially in his later years, he would sit in that rocking chair watching the news, or football, or baseball, and he had his own commentary that usually went like this: “yeah, yeah, yeah.” That was the most coherent thing he said. The rest was just a lot of grunts and groans.

Sometimes his noises were mocking, as if he’d grown tired of the incessant talking. Sometimes he made angry sounds, as if he were tired of political posturing and propaganda. Sometimes the grunts lacked energy, as if he was just plain tired of life. I wondered sometimes if he was even aware he was making these noises. Or - it occurred to me this week in reading Paul’s letter to the Romans - maybe my Grampa’s groans were SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR WORDS.

This year has been for me - and for many of us, I think - a season full of SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR WORDS. This coronavirus pandemic, racial violence, riots, protests, hatred and division, the disintegration of honesty and integrity in leadership, selfish attitudes that my freedom is more important than your safety... I just don’t know what to say anymore. I have no words. I watch the news and realize that I’m beginning to sound like my Grampa. I find myself grunting and

groaning, vocalizing but not verbalizing my exhaustion, my despair, my cynicism, and my sarcasm. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

“What then are we to say about these things?” Pauls poses this rhetorical question in his Letter to the Romans. The question follows a paragraph about predestination and what seem on the surface to be the *perks* for “those whom God foreknew.” But even a good Presbyterian who has struggled to understand predestination might well respond, “who cares?!” when mired in the muck of suffering and loss. Who cares about predestination when we’re just trying to figure out how to make it through another day?!

Even one Bible scholar who commented on the predestination issue in this passage understood such apathy and explained. Rather than the idea that predestination involves an inner call, “Paul is laying out the teaching of Spirit and predestination in just the opposite direction. *The Spirit helps us in our weakness, not by turning us inward in self-reflection, but outward: that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.* In suffering, a person who turns inward *does not know how to pray.* Such a person does not know what God is up to. What is needed for faith to persevere is someone outside you, your own personal groaner,

who gives the lament of your heart to the One who made the promise, not to the one who trusts it.” (Steven D. Paulson, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3) God makes the promise to all, whether we all trust it or not.

I love the idea that in the Spirit we have “our own personal groaner.” I imagine the Spirit not only groaning with us and sharing our sorrow, but also translating our weak and exhausted groaning and sighing into “the very language of God.” (Karen Chakoian, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3) When we find ourselves speechless, unable to find the words, too overwhelmed to even know what to pray for, the Spirit steps in, takes up our cause, and “intercedes with SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR WORDS.”

Though it was written, not preached, this passage becomes a powerful sermon from Paul as he continues with a rhetorical strategy of questions and answers. “If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the

love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"

He then quotes Psalm 44:22, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." Paul does this - according to one theologian - to make the point that such challenges as he listed above are "inevitable rather than chance." (Blair Alison Pogue, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3)

Perhaps not literally, but figuratively, we will all suffer hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword.

But Paul answers his own question once again with a powerful word of hope. "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Nothing. Can. Separate. Us. From. God's. Love. These seven words are my personal and professional fall-back. The bottom line of my faith. The knot at the

end of my rope. When suffering is all around and I can see no way out. When I don't know where to turn. When I am feeling my weakest. When I have no answers, or even know the right questions to ask. When I can't find the words. When there are no words to describe the depth of my sorrow and pain.

At a time of so much loss and grief and separation, the promise that there is nothing, nothing, nothing that can separate us from God's love can transform our sighs of sorrow and pain into sighs of peace. Sighs of hope. Sighs of confidence. May we know without a doubt that God loves us and may we share that promise and that love with one another... to the glory of God!

AMEN.