



SUNDAY SERMON

A Sighing Prayer

Desperation, desolation, joy, gratitude, anger, anxiety, frustration, acceptance, bliss – in the past 72 hours I think I can pretty honestly say that I have experienced each and every one these deeply human emotions. Yes life is monotonous, but the emotional response to living in a pandemic during social unrest is anything but.

You know as well as I do - these are intense times and this person, well she's had a hard time this week keeping it together and being strong. The world feels broken, and for a few days this week I let the brokenness just hang in the air like a bubble suspended in space. In no real rush to pop it or shoo it away...

Then Paul showed up and whispered through this text "The Spirit helps us in our weakness..." In an instant I was reminded that my weakness has a dual identity – my place of hurt is also a holy habitation.

On its face, these words about the Spirit praying for us when we can't are simply beautiful. To those of us who were raised to have a Can Do spirit, steeped as we all are in western individualism, this passage demonstrates that we don't always have to rely on our strength and will to find the words to pray. We can trust that the Holy One is helping us in this praying process.

Aiding the praying process is a cornerstone of the Episcopal Identity. Inherent to who we are as a type of Christian – we're a people who take very seriously what it means to pray and even how to pray. Our worship, our unifier as Episcopalians is a book of wonderful prayers. Even though we have taken extraordinary care into crafting prayers for all occasions, I still know that God would like to hear what's on all our hearts from time to time. Especially these days. When there feels like so much we can't change or can't do at this moment – we can be the ones who are praying for justice, wisdom, healing and ultimately peace.

This is not an insignificant act designed to make us feel better, although feeling better has been known to be a side effect. Paul is actually suggesting something exhilarating – by saying that the Holy Spirit intercedes within us according to God, (which is a closer translation of the text,) Paul is saying that God within us, is praying not simply in a way that pleases God, but in a way that is God. Consider that – your wordless prayers are not just your prayers, they are the Prayers of the Holy One herself being spoken on this plane of existence.

continued

DATE
Pentecost 8
Sunday, July 26, 2020

PREACHER
The Rev. Amy Molina-
Moore

St. Columba's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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In Paul's day, silent prayers were somewhat of an anomaly. Prayers were generally said out loud even if someone was by themselves. Nowadays sighs, silence, songs – all sorts of things are considered prayer. Rightly so. I don't think Paul would disagree with that either, but here it seems that Paul is trying to speak to a particular kind of prayer. The scholar N.T. Wright writes that Paul here "is speaking of an agonizing in prayer, a mixture of lament and longing in which, like a great swell of tide at sea 'too full for sound or foam,' the weight of what is taking place has nothing to do with the waves and ripples on the surface."

When we are agonizing in prayer. Caught in between lament and longing. That is when the Spirit is most powerfully present. And from within ourselves, the Spirit prays the words we can't say to God. It's a full loop. God within us praying to God all around us. In such a configuration everywhere we look, and even where we can't look, we are engulfed by God.

A few weeks back I had such an experience of Holy Engulfment. Someone in my orbit had just the most devastating experience in childbirth. The baby was stuck in the birth canal for too long with the umbilical cord around his neck and when he finally was born it was clear that he wasn't going to make it. Knowing that his mother was so excited for this baby - Her professional career is caring for kids in insecure home settings, so this baby was going to be so incredibly loved and cared for; just made this news even more devastating to me for some reason.

A few days passed and I received a text telling us of the time and day the baby was to be taken off life support. And when the hour came – I felt in my bones that deep heaviness, and weight that comes when the wall separating life and death becomes very thin. The air around me was electrified even though I was hours away and very far from that hospital room. And yes I prayed – but more than praying words, I sighed. I took big deep breaths. Steadying myself – deeply praying that any air in my lungs would reach the lungs in these parents. In my mind's eye I envisioned the Holy Spirit filling every crack and crevice of that hospital room. And if I'm honest, a big part of me wondered whether it was making any difference.

Still limping along with this sadness, in comes Paul's words this week to teach and remind me that my prayers are not just the best parts of me wishing and hoping for something better; my sighing prayers; the prayers when there are no words; those are the moments when God escapes from my mouth and breaths divine breath, and love into a world sorely in need of Divine Presence. I imagine we're all on the same page about this one thing – Right now the world needs all the sighing prayers she can get.

Paul concludes this dynamic passage by giving the ultimate pep talk. I can't think of two better verses to carry us through this strange, hopeful, depressing time so I'd like for us to hear them again – 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.

It's notable that this section culminates with such a triumphant, defiant assertion considering the context in which it was written. Paul is writing to a church that is being marginalized from the powerful Roman rulers on one side, and marginalized from their fellow marginalized Jews on the other side – at the heart of an Empire known for brutality. Scholar N.T. Wright summarizes what is going on here best – "it should never be forgotten that the triumph is announced and celebrated with irony and paradox, from the midst of circumstances that would be simply unbearable, were it not for faith in God the life-giver, and for the hope and above all the love that accompany this faith."

We are not the first Christians to find ourselves sinking deeper into the muck and mire, and we likely won't be the last. Our triumph, our celebration doesn't have to wait for when things are better or easier. Paul gives us language to overcome each and every day and reminds us that God has not left us to our own devices. When we are at our lowest – too tired, too scared, or too hopeless to know what to say, God will be the one praying within us, evidenced by our sighs too deep for words. Amen.