

“Sighs too Deep for Words”

As I prepared to become a pastor I worked one summer as a hospital chaplain. I was on call overnight twice a week. One early morning I was called to the hospice unit. A cancer patient who had been battling his illness for 18 months was sinking fast. He had died by the time I arrived. His stepson, a young man in his early twenties, was plunged into deep grief. He shared with me that his father had died in a car accident when he was seven years old. The confusion, fear, grief and anger of that time were still vivid in his memory. A couple years after his father’s death, his mother remarried. And his stepfather had become a true father to him, taking him fishing, teaching him to farm. Now, again, he was faced with the loss of a father.

“I don’t think I can stand it,” he said. “Nobody should have to lose TWO dads.”

His mother was heartbroken. This was the second time she had lost a husband.

The man’s sister was attempting to console his wife, but was distracted by worries of her own. Down the hall on the same floor her own husband was a patient. He’d been admitted the day before because he collapsed on the golf course. This woman and her husband lived in Florida. They had come to Illinois to be with her brother and his family as he neared death. They both, so far as they knew, were in good health. They were all waiting for results of the tests taken when he was admitted to the hospital.

After the funeral home director had come, and the family had left, I spent a few minutes with the hospice nurse who was straightening the room. Her movements were brisk, tense, angry. She snapped sheets and blankets as she folded them. Her eyes snapped too.

“It just doesn’t seem fair. Some families seem to have more than their share.” Her eyes filled and so did mine. We held each other and cried a while.

Later that day I visited the sister's husband. He was alone; his family had gone to get a bite to eat. The news was not good, he told me. He had lung cancer that had already spread to two other places.

As I left his room I felt so helpless, grieved and angry. I went to the hospital chapel and just sat in silence. So many people I'd encountered that summer faced tremendous difficulties and pain. In addition, my own family was dealing with the slow recovery of my 14 year old daughter following brain surgery, my husband's job loss, and my oldest son's reunion with his birth mother. As I sat in the chapel I felt so empty. I tried to pray, but just couldn't seem to find the way to do that. I felt helpless and dry, like an old bleached bone. I sat, felt bad, sighed deeply, and shed a few tears.

Paul's words to the church in Rome we heard today name the reality I was experiencing on that day years ago. People suffer in this present time, that's for sure. This is a world of change, of decay. The world is a place where beauty fades, and loveliness dries up. It is a dying world. The whole world groans in labor pains, longing to be set free from bondage to decay, death and sin.

Commentator William Barclay points out the contrast Paul uses in this passage. He contrasts the present age with the age to come. And **THERE** is the good news in the reading: **THIS** is an age of suffering, decay, sin and death. But in the age to come we—and not only we---**ALL CREATION**--will be liberated—freed from the suffering, losses, sorrows that accompany sin and death.

Paul gets quite excited about this age to come. He assures us that our suffering will be more than made up for in the final, complete triumph of God.

We may find it hard to feel as excited as Paul with the assurances that God will **WIN** the battle with sin and death. Paul recognizes this. He knows we experience doubt. We have fuzzy vision. He says, "Hey, if we could see **CLEARLY FOR SURE** what will be, without any doubt or worries, then we wouldn't need **HOPE**. That wouldn't be **HOPE**, it would be **CERTITUDE!**" Paul offers comfort, saying that we can't picture it plainly or understand it completely. We aren't **DEFECTIVE** because we can't do that—but we **ARE** given the ability to **HOPE**. And that's what keeps us going.

Notice that Paul isn't just promising us "pie in the sky by and by". That promise wears thin in the painful struggles we encounter in life. Paul tells us the Holy Spirit is with us and within us, bringing NOW what we need to live in THIS age—and also bringing a whiff of the perfume of the age to come.

Romans 8:26: *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.*

When I encountered that verse years ago, I immediately claimed it as "mine". The verse appeared in the Grand Sweep readings for this past week. It also is included in the Lectionary readings for today. I love this verse and put reminders of it in my life. When our family goes skiing we carry radios to speak to one another. They are set to: 8, 26.

These words help me live in the midst of the struggles of life. I find great comfort in remembering that even if I don't think about the verse at all, God's spirit is STILL HELPING ME, with SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR WORDS.

I didn't think about Romans 8:26 as I sat in the hospital chapel that summer. I had no conscious realization that I had prayed. I just sat. I sighed. I cried. And God's Spirit within me prayed without words. Can that be true? It doesn't seem so very helpful. I didn't leave the chapel totally transformed or lifted out of my grief.

I believe Romans 8:26 sheds light on that experience—on prayer, on life, on our relationship with God. It may clear up some misconceptions we may hold, about prayer and the way God is present in our lives.

First- this verse teaches us that prayer is not always verbal—spoken or thought out in words. It can be, but it doesn't have to be.

Next- it teaches us that we don't have to consciously choose to pray, or even know that we are praying for prayer to take place. God within us can pray through us and for us.

This verse teaches that we must not assume the way we know God "heard" our prayer is that we FEEL BETTER. God's intercession--- God's Spirit working FOR US, is not always experienced in joyful, peaceful or relieved

feelings. God may act for us in “sighs too deep for words”. Some translations say “groanings too difficult to utter” or “which baffle speech to utter”. God’s Spirit speaks within us in sighs and groanings, not just in lilting flutes or bright trumpets. Remembering this, we may find comfort and hope even in our feelings of struggle and sorrow.

Verse 28 is another favorite for many people: ***We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*** Please remember: the fact that it says “all things work together for good” does NOT mean everything that happens in this world is God’s will. It DOES promise that in ALL THINGS, even nightmare realities, God is present and working to bring good out of all situations.

We live in the present age. We, along with all creation, groan for release from death and sin. As we long for that release, we can trust that God’s Spirit is within us, helping us to pray, even without words. We are helped to HOPE that God’s ultimate victory is sure. We are given the Holy Spirit NOW—and through that Spirit we can glimpse the age to come.

I like Paul Achte-meier’s image:

We are like people on a drought-parched land, who hear the distant thunder of the approaching storm. The freshening wind brings with it the smell of rain and the first few drops of moisture. We rejoice as we stand on that barren land, knowing it will soon be washed with the life-giving rain whose presence we already sense. So we stand in our parched and barren present, looking forward with confidence to God’s redemption we see begun in Christ, a redemption sure to come because with the Spirit’s presence we already feel those first showers of God’s own healing love.

So, watch, listen, wait. And pay attention to the signs of the age to come!
Amen.