

DEEP SIGHS

Romans 8:22-27

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

Pentecost June 9, 2019

It happened some years ago, but the embarrassment that comes with the memory is still fresh. I'm thinking of the morning I stopped by my local grocery store to pick up just one item while on my way to an appointment. I was running a little behind schedule, so I dashed into the store, found the item and hurried on to the check-out. There were lines at all the check-out counters, so I chose one of the self-check-out scanners. I scanned my first and only item and put it in the bag, as instructed by the disembodied voice from the check-out machine. After a moment the computer said again, "Please scan your first item and place it in the bag." "I did already," I said to no one in particular, but then I noticed the purchase wasn't showing on the screen, so I scanned it again. Nothing. I heard again, "Please scan your first item and place it in the bag." So, I scanned it again, and several times more... until at last the purchase showed up on the screen... *six times*. It was at that point, I think, that I let out an audible sigh... whereupon the woman who was overseeing the operation walked over and said, "That's all right, honey. Just let it out. Just let it all out." Then she did something to clear the scanner; I started over, and this time, of course, it worked perfectly...and I was grateful...and mortified.

I thought to myself on the way to my appointment that I had probably been sighing a lot that morning. I know something about sighs; I raised two children through adolescence, after all. Sometimes we *intend* our sighs to be dramatic. At other times, sighs can simply be the body's way of compensating for stress... its way of making us breathe deeply when we are so hard at it we forget to breathe. Apparently, when we experience stress, we breathe shallow breaths. And, so, our bodies compensate for the lack of oxygen by making us sigh. Our bodies force us to take a deep breath.¹

We sigh... when? When the stressful pace gets to us. When the last paper is finished, the last test taken, and graduation and the big next step loom before us. When we sit at the hospital bedside with a loved one who is struggling so and we find ourselves unable to help. When we sit before the headlines of the day and find deep weariness and a measure of despair creeping in. When the toll of life together makes us question the promises we made to one another. In such moments, our sighs *may* be our bodies' way of forcing us to take a deep breath, but they may also express more about our interior lives than words alone can express. Many of our sighs, I believe, are prayers without words, prayers we breathe instead of *say*.

So, this week I returned to the claim of the apostle Paul that God helps us in our weakness, at the very point where we find ourselves breathless, and intercedes with sighs too deep for words. It is a remarkable thing to say and, whatever it means exactly, a profound word of comfort and a wonderful affirmation about the Holy Spirit for this Pentecost Sunday. I like the way it echoes and responds to Paul's language a couple of verses earlier about the groaning

¹ Shannon Johnson Kershner, "Breathing Deeply," sermon on *Day 1* radio broadcast, June 4, 2006.

of creation: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves....”

The entire creation is groaning, says Paul, in labor pains... and then he connects that groaning with the groaning of the Spirit (in the Greek, groaning and sighing are the same word). My guess is that anyone who has experienced labor pains would say that groaning is the better word choice. The Lutheran pastor Heidi Neumark once said that when she was in labor, she didn't offer up any sweet, little sighs.² Paul is not speaking of sweet sighs here either. Biblical scholar N.T. Wright says:

The groaning of the church, in the midst of the groaning world, is sustained and even inspired by the groaning of the Spirit.... Those who cannot see that for which they eagerly hope need assistance to peer into the darkness ahead and to pray God's future into the present. It is that assistance that the Spirit provides....

The point Paul is making... is that the Spirit's own very self intercedes within the Christian precisely at the point where he or she, faced with the ruin and misery of the world, finds that there are no words left to express ... the sense of futility and the longing for redemption. It is not (as some early scribes added to the text...) that the Spirit intercedes “for us;” that misses the point... What Paul is saying is that the Spirit, active within the innermost being of the Christian, is doing the very interceding the Christian longs to do, even though the only evidence that can be produced is inarticulate groaning.³

The Spirit's sighs and groans thus collaborate with our own. In solidarity, the Spirit voices our own longing for redemption, confirming both the painful reality of the present and the hopeful future that lies beyond that reality. Romans scholar Paul Meyer once said that the gift of the Spirit helped fill that gap between present reality and future hope, giving us reason for confidence.⁴

That gap didn't begin with us; it was clearly part of the experience of the first disciples, too. My pastor-friend Shannon Kershner got me thinking about ways the Spirit took up the sighs and groaning of the disciples, too, as they eyed the gap between what they all saw and what they hoped for, and felt little confidence as that Pentecost day arrived:

By this point in their journey, the disciples were probably quite breathless themselves. Remember all that has happened in the last 50 days for them. Jesus' goodbye. His arrest and crucifixion.... [Then], his resurrection and continued ministry with them....

And, [then], just as the disciples caught their breath, Jesus did as he said he would – he left. He was taken out of their sight and returned to the One from whom he came. It must have been heart-wrenching. The wind was simply knocked out of them [again]. I bet they sighed loudly with stress and fear, the web of chaos winding around their throats.

² Heidi B. Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2003, 107.

³ N.T. Wright, “Romans,” *The New Interpreter's Bible. Vol. X*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2002, 599.

⁴ Paul W. Meyer, “Romans: A Commentary,” *The Word in This World*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, 192.

And so the disciples did what all church people do in times of fear and chaos - they had a meeting. They ... began to try and get their game plan together. There was so much to do. They needed to get organized. They needed to choose more apostles to help them with all the work Jesus had left [to them]. After all, they were now supposed to tell [others] about what God had done in Jesus. It was a daunting mission.... They could not believe they were now the ones in charge of continuing Jesus' ministry to the outcast, to the poor, to the powerful, to the sick – all without his physical presence. It was enough to [leave them] breathless.

But before [they] knew what was happening, out of the blue they heard a mighty wind heading their way. The wind blew through the entire house, filling each of them with a breath that came from somewhere else, Someone Else. The ... breath, filled them with a power they did not understand. They had not asked for this breath nor expected it. This power, this breath, this courage just swooped into the room and filled them up in a way they could have never predicted... [offering them] a reserve of strength they did not know they possessed. They came face to face, lung to lung, with the gift of God's Holy Spirit, God's holy breath.⁵

“The Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words,” says the apostle. That holy breath makes it clear, as David Bartlett said once, that our prayers to God really begin with God and end with God... which ties to a larger truth in Romans: that our *lives* begin ... and end with God.⁶ God's holy breath, which we have known in more subtle ways, perhaps, [came] dramatically on that Pentecost in Jerusalem.

That first wave of apostles felt directly a great “reserve of strength”, which was then amplified and compounded by the inspired energy of the community, which is to say it became a *combined* strength in those days, as it is today. Heidi Neumark, whose experience with the groans of childbirth I mentioned earlier, remembers something else about that birthing experience.

I remember the importance of my husband's hands during my [labor]. I held on tightly the entire time. I recall my horror when a nurse suggested that, after about ten hours of labor, it might be good for Gregorio to get himself a cup of coffee. Good? Was she insane? It was terrible to release his hand for even a moment. By the end, his hand was colored with slight bruises as evidence of my grip and his steadfast love entwined with mine . . .

In a larger sense, of course, the same is true for most any important labor of love in this groaning world. Indeed, as Neumark says, the labor required for us to be Christ's ambassadors of healing and wholeness in this world requires “the steadfast grasp of many hands willing to stretch out, touch, and bear the bruises of struggle. It is hard work. The contractions that enlarge our hearts and minds and stretch open our systems and structures for new life produce groaning and pain.... *Yet, says Paul, I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.*”⁷

⁵ Kershner; cf. note 1.

⁶ David L. Bartlett, *Romans: Westminster Bible Companion*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, 78.

⁷ Neumark, 107.

It is confidence and hope in that glory and in the redemption of our own lives and of God's creation that keeps Christ's church moving forward. The ground of such confidence and hope is the gift of the Holy Spirit, the transforming power from God that enables us to see new life coming to birth where others see only disaster and decay... that enables us to see resurrection where others see only the triumph of darkness and death.⁸

A friend suggests that in light of Paul's Letter to the Romans, and Paul's testimony of the Spirit's solidarity with us, maybe at Pentecost it would be best to leave all the tongues-of-fire banners, all the red balloons and pinwheels in the storage closet... that as odd as it seems, maybe the better thing to do this year might be to pull the advent wreath out of the closet and light once again the candle of hope.

Paul makes no mention of Pentecost – or Advent, for that matter – but Paul does make it clear that the community created by God's Spirit is an *advent community*. We are defined by what is yet to be, [by] a hope for that which is unseen.⁹

Of course, in this wrinkle of time between now and then, along with the whole creation we still groan... we still sigh... we still ache for the day of wholeness and peace and redemption. We struggle toward that day. But we are not alone. We are not alone. We have the Holy Spirit, and as the apostle says,

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

That, friends, is a promise.

⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans*, Macon, GA, Smyth and Helwys, 1997, 130.

⁹ Thomas Are, Jr., in a paper on this text presented to the January 2009 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Italics mine.