

November 10, 2019
Rev. Jane Florence
Romans 8:26-27
“Sighs Too Deep for Words”



I hear myself sigh sometimes with great heaviness these days. Most of the news is pretty depressing. With every tweet, post, and report, it seems the meanness, violence and divisiveness grows greater. A knot forms in my belly, and I hear myself sigh in despair.

I spent sometime this last week in court. No, I was not charged with anything. I was merely an observer, a silent witness. I followed a case of a man whose crime was helping people. He helped a young couple buy a car then a house. They paid for the car and house, and he helped them start a business too. He helped them for years. He was like an adopted father to them and grandfather to their children. He is 75 years old. He was the one sitting in the defendant chair this week. Because the people he helped ended up doing some bad things. They hired undocumented workers, and he was swept up in their arrest by association. It was sad to watch a kind, 75 year old man, a pillar of his community, sitting so defeated in a federal courtroom for helping people.

I sighed- what have we come to.

A Caring Bridge notice popped up in my email inbox this week. That's not a good thing. Caring Bridge is a social media group for people to keep family and friends updated about their difficult health care situations. The post alerted me that a close friend and former roommate from seminary received news that cancer she fought hard and aggressively five years ago is present in her body again. I sighed.

This text for today begins with "the whole creation has been groaning together in labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly" (8:22-23). The scriptures tell of sighs and groans. Perhaps the best we can do these days is groan and sigh. Politics, disease, division, broken bodies and relationships, sigh. But the thing about the long deep audible exhale of a sigh, it can come forth for many reasons not always sad ones.

I've felt my spirit sigh many times, but it is not just in the heaviness of bad news. When I come to the end of a week, and the sun is shining, and the sky is clear blue, (like yesterday) I slip my kayak into the lake, and I paddle away from shore. I watch the eagles circle high overhead, and blue herons look me in the eye as I float by. With each stroke of the paddle, the multitude of thoughts that are constantly spinning in my head fall away into the ripple of water behind my small craft. I am suspended between the teeming life in the water below and the vast expanse of the heavens above. In the thin place, my soul sighs in a good way, "Ahhh." It sighs in peace and restoration and renewal. My soul breathes in that sigh. There need be no words upon my lips- no words in my head, for the awe and gratitude of my soul are expressed in each deep breathing sigh.

When I enter this sanctuary here, and I see you gathered here, greeting one another, hugging one another, and light streams in these beautiful windows and music swells in praise.. I offer a deep sigh of thanksgiving and joy.

When I held my granddaughter in my arms Friday, (she's three months old now) she smiled at the stuffed fox I held before her, she kicked her feet and wiggled about in delight, she

tried hard to coo and then she sighed deeply, contently snuggled against me. I had not noticed, but I realized a baby sighs too.

The scripture says our spirit prays without words, but with sighs, with sighs too deep for words, with sighs of spirit before words. Sighs of worry and fear and sighs of contentment and peace. God's Spirit knows the language of our soul sighs. Perhaps it is when we let words fall away, when we get to the point of awe or sorrow, when words are too small perhaps that is when we are communicating more directly with that which is the Divine.

Prayers that are full of pretty words are nice. They allow us to form and name, even clarify our desires both for ourselves and for those others we allow to listen. But our spirit does not need words. It can speak the profound in silence.

I remember the first time I read about prayer without words, "discursive prayer" it is called I didn't get it. It took awhile for me to conceptualize silence as prayer. I thought I had to tell God something in a prayer. I thought I had to confess or ask or report or name something. I was taught that prayer is "talking to God", so I figured I needed to be saying something. But I found that I can be praying, by intentional be-ing.

Some call it contemplative prayer; some practice it as centering prayer.

Margaret Silf writes of it,

I suggest that creation itself gives us a gateway [to God]. In every moment of our lives, a silent, invisible miracle of exchange is taking place.

We breathe out the air that our bodies no longer need, which is mainly carbon dioxide, a waste product for us but the very thing that the green leaves on the trees and plants need to produce their own energy.

So they receive our carbon dioxide and, through the process of photosynthesis, produce not only their own life energy, but also oxygen—

a waste product for them, but the very thing we need to live.

Whenever I stop my busyness for a few moments to look around me, I am amazed at this arrangement, and it makes me think of prayer.

So perhaps a good way to open our hearts up to the gift of contemplation is simply to become still, and, quite literally, to breathe out our waste—all that clogs us and deadens us—and to breathe in God's renewing life, as we breathe in the fresh oxygen that the plants have made for us.

We are becoming aware of the mysterious exchange of life between ourselves and God. And there is no reason that any period of quiet might not become prayer of this kind.¹

When words recede into the background and are replaced with a deeply experienced sense of God, that is prayer. Soul sighs express in all truth and honesty what words might not. Awareness of the Divine beyond words is woven throughout our faith tradition from the Hebrew words, "Be still and know that I AM God" or listen to the 'still small voice within.' Jesus going off to a quiet place alone to be with God; the mystical writings of the Gospel of John or the Apostle Paul through the desert fathers and mothers, to Thomas Merton, a new resurgence brings the ancient practice back to our awareness.

Contemporary Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes, "Silence is somehow at the very foundation of all reality. It is [silence] out of which all being comes and to which all things

¹ <https://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/prayer/personal-prayer-life/different-ways-to-pray/the-gift-of-contemplative-prayer-by-margaret-silf>

return. The soul does not use words. ..We must find a way to return to this place, to live in this place, to live in this place of inner silence.”²

Prayer is where you enter into communion with the holy, and like a good friend or soul mate whose presence is all that is needed and words fall short. and Sigh says it all.

Prayer doesn't have to be about us getting the right words to tell the Holy One what's up. We need the words for our own clarification maybe. Prayer is about connecting with the Divine. When our soul sighs, or groans, and awe and wonder and peace fill us, we have prayed. When we allow our spirit, our heart to open and trust that “God” is there to hear whatever is there - even when we don't really know ourselves what is that is bringing joy or despair, in the silence of truth, we have prayed.

The scripture for today is part of a longer passage. If you aren't familiar with Romans 8, I commend it to you. It has a great verse that basically says, “everything is going to work out okay in the end.”(28) or as Julian of Norwich writes, “all shall be well.”

Later in the chapter Paul goes on to ask, “what can separate us from the love of God? Can hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril?” Can the rulers of the world - separate us from God? Paul answers with a resounding, “no, nothing can separate us from the love of God.” All shall be well.

We may not know what to pray or how to put our feelings, fears, joys and gratitudes into sufficient or pretty words; nevertheless, The One who made us, knit us together and knows us and hears the sighs of our soul too deep for words.

Perhaps you know someone who has given up on prayer. Given up on church. Given up on God. I think we all probably know that someone. After you have sat in the light of God's love in the silence of your heart - letting your soul sigh in pain or in joy to unite with the God of us all, I invite you to hold those who do not know their soul sighs are audible, to hold them into the light as well. I encourage you to pray for those who are not connected to their divine soul sighs. Pray in silence without words knowing God dwells in the depth of our soul where words fall away and Love beholds all.

May we be a congregation of prayer.

² Richard Rohr. *The Silent Compassion: Finding God in Contemplation* .