

## A Sigh Too Deep for Words

---

Romans 8: 26 – 39

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent  
The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ  
July 26, 2020 – 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

### I.

It was 9:00 in the morning on Friday and we were still wrapped in the coastal fog. Standing in the parking lot of the mortuary, wearing masks, and keeping safe distance, family and friends had gathered to mourn the sudden loss of a young man. It was the first memorial that I've attended since the pandemic began. It was raw and real and hard and beautiful and holy. We shouldn't have been there – he was too young – and yet there we were.

Perhaps Paul had an experience like this in mind when he wrote: “the *Spirit* helps us in our weakness.”

This portion of Paul's Letter to the Romans is one of the passages most often read at funerals.

The apostle admits with honesty, “we do not know how to pray as we ought.”

Even as a pastor, in the face of death and loss, it's really hard to know what to say.

Therefore, I try to remember that less is more, and that silence can be eloquent.

Perhaps that is what Paul is getting at with the next verse, an exquisite line of poetry:

“The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”

Sighs too deep for words.

For those of us who are finding it hard to pray, who don't know what to say these days, there is comfort in knowing that the Spirit's presence sounds like a wordless sigh...

### II.

During these days of pandemic and war and violence, death is all around us.

Of course, death is always present, but as we stay close to home and consume news, it's possible that we have become more aware of our mortality than we had been.

As of this sermon, close to 150,000 people have died of Covid-19 in the United States.

An increasing number of us know someone who has succumbed to the disease.

And being sheltered in place has forced many white people to pay sustained attention to the stories and images of people of color dying at the hands of those who broke their vow to serve and protect.

Alongside these tragedies, all deaths feel close to home these days. The deaths of civil rights heroes John Lewis and Rev. C.T. Vivian feel momentous. Recent deaths of church members – Martha Rowlands, Prue Manley, Pam Ammondson – contain an added ache because we have not been able to gather our bodies together so that we can release their bodies to earth.

In the face of death and loss and grief, Paul's next words sound naively optimistic: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God."

Do we know that?

What sense could it make to say those words?

They sound so formulaic and falsely triumphal as if those who love God can count on things always working out.

Sometimes that's called the prosperity Gospel.

I call it horse pucky.

If it's true that all things work together for good, then it's got to be on a much deeper, or more cosmic, frame than the day to day realities of our lives.

Because here, today, in this life, no matter how much one loves God, all things do not seem to be working together for good.

Those words are the kind of words that do more harm than good in the face of tragic loss.

Early in my ministry, I was summoned to the hospital because a church member had just given birth to a stillborn child.

"Can you baptize him?" the mother asked.

I had no time to think through the theology of baptizing a stillborn baby, so I said "Yes," and I put some water in a plastic hospital cup, and I made the sign of the cross on his tiny body, and I baptized him in the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, God the Holy Spirit.

It was heart wrenching, and yet I'm so grateful to that mother for asking for what she needed.

Otherwise I might have been tempted to say something stupid like, "All things work together for good."

### III.

But maybe Paul is not as vapid as we might think.

He was certainly acquainted with violence and death, with disease and despair, with being thrown in jail and denied freedom.

Speaking out of this life's experiences, Paul shares a vision of God as the One in whom the whole universe takes shape, including in the life of Jesus the Christ.

The theological language in these verses is dense and fraught – with words like foreknew and predestined – but I think what Paul is saying is that through Christ God is forming one big, inclusive, human family.

And to see oneself as a part of that family means to see oneself as called to a divine purpose and destiny.

Perhaps “all things work together for good” means *all* things in the grand expanse of God’s evolving universe.

Perhaps Paul is talking about the mystery of life underneath the surface of things.

Sometimes that mystery reveals itself during experiences of loss.

My very first memorial service as a pastor was for a woman named Holly who died of cancer leaving her husband and teenage daughter and large extended family.

Holly was both a member of the congregation I served and also part of a Hindu meditation group.

In the midst of the family’s loss, we came up with an idea of how to honor both of her spiritual communities.

It ended up being one of the most beautiful liturgical expressions I’ve ever experienced.

The congregation at the memorial service was invited to sing a simple song with one word – Alleluia – and those who wanted to chant “Om” were invited to do that at the same time as the singing.

Later someone pointed out to me that “Alleluia” and “Aum” contain similar vowel sounds that resonate in the body and during prayer and meditation.

If you can imagine it – a large grieving community singing Alleluia with a bass note of Aum underneath.

But that wasn’t even the biggest surprise.

The biggest surprise came when we realized we were singing her name, Holly.

#### IV.

I’m sure Paul had seen moments like this, had accompanied the communities of which he was a part in rituals of dying and release.

He had felt the pain of being part of a marginalized community, which is what the Christian church was for its first 300 years.

Providing his congregation with pastoral support, he asks a rhetorical question: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?”

He asks with a *who*, but answers with a *what*.<sup>i</sup>

Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

He is naming all of the death-dealing powers swirling around his community.

We could come up with our own list: pandemic, or unemployment, or racism, or bigotry, or greed, or fear.

I don't think Paul is a naïve optimist, at least not in this chapter. He describes what he sees the people of his day going through in this way: "We are being killed all day long. We are like sheep to be slaughtered."

And what does one say in response to that?  
What does one say in the face of unjust violence and death?  
What does one say beyond the sigh of the Spirit that speaks for us when we've run out of words?

I'll tell you what Paul says.

He starts with one word: No.

"No" is his act of defiance in the face of violence and death.

No, death, you will not have the last word.

No, violence, you will not define us.

No, for "in all of these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

I love the phrase "more than conquerors."

It makes me think of a Juneteenth service I attended once at a small Baptist Church in Colorado Springs. <sup>ii</sup>

The church's pastor was preaching on this passage and when he got to the phrase "more than conquerors," he swept his hand and chucked his sermon manuscript to the floor.

"We are more than conquerors," I remember him saying, "because conquerors use their power to defeat, but we use our power to overcome."

## V.

Now that the preacher Paul has said a defiant "no" in the face of violence and death, and has established that we are more than conquerors through God who loves us, he presses on to the gospel proclamation:

"I am convinced," he says, "convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depths, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

"I am convinced," he says. What are you convinced of?

Another way to put it is, "What are you willing to die for?" because the answer to that question helps answer the question, "What am I willing to live for?"<sup>iii</sup>

I am convinced that each and every human life contains multitudes.<sup>iv</sup>

We are more than the sum of our identities, as important as those can be.

I want to live out of that place of love which is stronger than death.<sup>v</sup>

I want to be a part of that big human family God is even now creating.

I want the Spirit to sigh through me and I want ears to hear it sigh through you.  
I want to find strength in weakness and knowing in not knowing.<sup>vi</sup>  
I want to say “yes” to life and “no” to injustice,<sup>vii</sup> all the while trusting that, over the horizon, just beyond our view, all things work together for good.  
Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Gary V. Simpson, “The Christian Century,” July 15, 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> Rev. Clarence Davis, Friendship Baptist Church

<sup>iii</sup> I think I heard my dad, Rev. W. Matthew Broadbent, say this once.

<sup>iv</sup> Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

<sup>v</sup> Song of Songs 8: 6

<sup>vi</sup> Isaiah 53: 7

<sup>vii</sup> Richard Rohr, “Contemplative Activists,” July 17, 2020.