

# Sighs Too Deep for Words

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Romans 8:26-39 and Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

I do not know how many weddings happened in Rochester, or across the nation, yesterday. A bunch, I bet. And I bet a large proportion of those weddings included a reading of I Corinthians 13, what I sometimes call the “love chapter.” You know it well. It certainly wasn’t written with weddings in mind, but rather, to a small, struggling, sometimes conflicted church. Nonetheless, these words – when they are not overly sentimentalized – are spot-on at a wedding. “The greatest of these is love.”

Likewise, I don’t know how many funerals, or memorial services, happened in Rochester, or across the nation, this past week. Two here. And I equally bet that some proportion of those funerals or memorial services included a reading of Romans 8. You know it well, as well.

The letter to the church at Rome was written by the Apostle Paul to pave the way for a visit to a church he had never seen. Though it appears as the first of Paul’s biblical letters, because of its length, it most likely was the last letter written entirely by Paul.

Romans has two audiences – or rather, two segments of the same audience, at this baby church in Rome. Paul needed to say that this new church was welcoming to gentiles, that is, to those who did not enter it through Judaism and therefore did not observe Jewish law. Bu he also needed to embrace the “continuing validity of Israel in God’s purpose” (*Harper Collins Study Bible*, page 2114). The gospel was for all humanity, Paul insisted, both an organizational and a theological affirmation.

Romans is Paul’s tour de force in terms of ideas – justification, grace, law – but it is also a great example of how Paul adapted Greco-Roman rhetoric to make his case.

Our passage this morning begins at verse 26 of chapter 8 – but this section really begins a few verses earlier, at verse 18. Paul is making the case for God known through Jesus Christ – “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”

That’s the case...that the sufferings we endure, the sufferings, in fact, that all creation endures, will be redeemed in hope. Paul calls that “glory.” For now, we wait, in patience and hope. But we do not wait alone. The Spirit helps us. When we do not know how to wait, how to be patient, how to pray, even, the Spirit helps us. “...with sighs too deep for words...”

Sighs too deep for words. God is present in deepest needs, ours, the world’s, and when we cannot find the words or energy, even, to muster a prayer, the Spirit signs with us in solidarity, groans with us in compassion.

Charles Cousar writes that the Spirit (is)joining...voices with the moans of the terminally ill who long for death, with the angry raging of the oppressed who seek freedom, with the whimpers of the hopeless who have no strength left to cry...” When we have no capacity, no energy, no words, no hope – the Spirit intercedes for us.

That was good news to the Roman church some 2000 years ago; it remains good news to this church now. Solidarity and compassion and hope. These are the things we need as we live our lives and whatever hardships and challenges we face. This is extraordinary both in how is the focus – each of us – and also in how cosmic is the scale – the whole creation.

Then the familiar and iconic words that follow, beginning at verse 31 of chapter 8. Katherine Grieb writes that Paul is doing two things here. He is exhibiting a deep sense of realism and a deeply confident trust. Realism means that suffering continues. Grieb writes that Paul “does not expect any magical protection...from the normal hardships of life.” (*The Story of Romans*, pages 79-83)

I was thinking about Paul’s list this week, found in verse 35. As I read this list, I thought of how many, many of you, many of us, are facing hardship or distress. I thought of your life stories. Deteriorating health, physical and mental and emotional and spiritual. The fraying and ending of relationships. Jobs that offer little satisfaction, or no job at all. I thought of chemotherapy, and addiction, and

depression and memory loss. I thought of caring for declining parents and spouses.

I thought this week, as a straight white male, about what persecution looks like. I thought about the persecution of transgender Americans who were told by their government that they are unqualified to serve in the military, or LGBTQ Americans who heard an argument from their government that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 does not cover employment discrimination based on sexual orientation.

I thought about peril, or sword, shots ringing out, stabbings, in American urban centers, including just a handful of miles from where we gather, or missiles being tested, or refugees being threatened, or the vulnerable of all kinds being abused.

Paul is realistic; these things will happen, in the year 50 and in the year 2017. What gives us hope is that the Spirit intercedes for us and perseveres with us, so that none of these things will separate us from the love of Christ.

That doesn't mean we accept these things happily or passively. I cannot believe that's what God wants. We seek to persevere in the face of hardship. We resist persecution. We fight. We are resilient. We endure, for ourselves, for others. And we never do it alone. Never.

And when we cannot do it, when deep fatigue sets in, the Spirit does it for us and with us, with sighs too deep for words. We will always, always, have the love of God on our side.

And then this...“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.”

This is Paul's faith, and his rhetoric, at its highest and best. In language nearly a century old, theologian Karl Barth wrote that "If we fix our eyes upon the place where the course of the world reaches its lowest point...where its groanings are most bitter...we shall encounter there Jesus Christ...the transformation of all things occurs where the riddle of human life reaches its culminating point..." (*The Epistle to the Romans*, page 327)

Grieb writes that “Paul considers a long list of things that might seem more powerful than God’s love and calls on his hearers to trust the reality of God...”

It is a powerful progression, poignant in its clear and realistic understanding of human suffering, and soaring in its capacity to place that suffering in a cosmic context.

We will be set free from our bondage, whatever bondage that is. And until we are, God, through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus and the ongoing presence of the Spirit, will be with us, abiding, strengthening us in perseverance and resilience.

Nothing, ultimately, can condemn us. God intercedes for us, in love, and nothing can separate us from that love. Paul was convinced of that. And even at those points where we are not convinced, cannot be convinced, we wait, in trust, and hope.

Hear these words from the poet Susan Palo Cherwein:

“In deepest night, in darkest days,/when harps are hung, no songs we raise,/when silence must suffice as praise,/yet sounding in us quietly/there is the song of God.

When friend was lost, when love deceived,/dear Jesus wept, God was bereaved;/so with us in our grief God grieves,/and round about us mournfully there are the tears of God.

When through the waters winds our path,/around us pain, around us death:/deep calls to deep, a saving breath,/and found beside us faithfully/there is the love of God.”

There is the love of God. Amen.