

A sermon preached by
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Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
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Texts: Psalm 105:1-11
Romans 8:26-39

The Sigh

At the end of May, I received word that my younger cousin was in the hospital. He was 32. He was kind and sweet and always smiling and polite to everyone he met. He was a ray of sunshine in this world. He was a musician and had the soul of an artist and the heart of a dreamer. He had plans to write the Great American Novel one day. However, he also had some dark places. He was uncertain about his future and despite being the youngest of 6 children he would find himself feeling alone at times. He struggled, as many of us do, and then this pandemic happened and being quarantined he began to self medicate to numb the pain. When I heard he was in a hospital, alone, and his siblings could not be by his side, I just kept thinking about this text from Romans...nothing can separate us from the love of God...nothing can separate us from the love of God...nothing can separate us from the love God.

A few days after he passed I decided to look at today's lectionary selections, since I knew I would be preaching and there it was: Romans 8: 26-39. If I had not been smiling so big, I may have cried. Sometimes the Spirit moves in mysterious ways and I have found, as I have dived into this text, that God provides healing and hope for us even in times when healing and hope seem next to impossible.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he covers a wide range of topics. Everything from the fate of the Jewish people to the role of the individual throughout history, to the responsibility of the citizens to the government, and on and on. The reader has to keep in mind that Paul is writing this letter to the military, political, economic capital of the world during his time. I imagine this task was a little overwhelming and yet Paul manages to write this letter beautifully, giving us some of our favorite lines in all of scripture. I know that for me, personally, my favorite verse is found in the book of Romans, " Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

And here we find in today's scripture another favorite passage that is beautifully written and has such power and meaning that it has literally changed lives and given people hope in times where hope may have been lost.

Until this point, Paul has been covering topics like the problems with the law to sin to the power which saves us from the law and sin. That power is God's Spirit. The Spirit has the power to save us. In an earlier passage, Paul reminds his readers that they have been adopted as God's children. God becomes our Abba, our Daddy, someone we form an intimate, child-like dependent and loving relationship with. A Parent who loves us and holds us close when the storms of life are too much. A parent whose love never goes away, but stays, even when we may not think we deserve that love. And God's love for us is so deep, that God gifted us the Spirit which saves us and empowers us and helps us in our weakness, even to the point of interceding for us in prayer at times when we may not be able to find the words to speak.

I think during this time of pandemic and uncertainty we can wrap our minds around what it means to be in a place where words seem to escape us making our prayers difficult to say. Enter the sigh. Paul says, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that the very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

For the single mother who is juggling work and found herself suddenly trying to help teach her children and being PE coach and dance instructor and cafeteria worker and who has to hide her anxiety from her children, she finds time alone where she simply has no words, and just lets out a long sigh.

For the hospital worker who has seen it all and has had to sit beside the dying while on the phone with loved ones, listening to the intimate details of their last conversations as his patient takes his last breath. Later he finds himself in a broom closet fighting back tears, no words, only sighs.

For the child who is struggling because they miss their classmates and friends and who desperately needs the help of those trained to teach him with his special needs and he has no words, but just sighs.

For the teacher who misses her kindergarten class and hearing the laughter and being greeted after recess with fistfuls of dandelions, she sits in her empty classroom with art removed from the walls, head in her hands and lets out a big sigh.

For the many pastors who preach before empty pews and long for the handshakes and hugs and high fives from their congregants on their way out each week, who continue to define what the church of the future will look like and it is all so overwhelming, they sit in their office and sigh.

For those who are home alone with no physical contact from the outside world except the grocery delivery person. For those who are consumed with loneliness and despair, but know staying put is the safest place for them to currently reside. They sit alone staring blankly at their tv screen, not really paying attention to what they are watching, but instead find themselves in a series of sighs.

For those struggling with abuse and depression. For those who have missed out on celebrations such as proms and graduations and weddings and birthday parties. For those who are hurting and sick and lost and alone. For those who watch their children die by violence and for those who have no home...for all those who have no words, but simply sigh...know that your sighs are heard and that the Spirit God has sent is there to intercede on your behalf.

The Greek word for spirit is Pneuma which means breath. The Spirit acts on our behalf even as we simply breathe. Sometimes those breaths come as sighs too deep for words. Still, God hears those sighs and knows our thoughts and somehow our inability to form words becomes clear for God through the help of the Spirit. And it is truly mysterious and beautiful.

As we continue looking at this text from Romans we read that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. Absolutely nothing. In the end, it is love that wins. This love from God is not earned, it is given freely. God's love has no limitations. It is there and it surrounds us. God's love conquers all sin and even conquers death. It is stronger than anything we could imagine or go through. God's love never leaves us or forsakes us.

Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, put this text in his own language saying, "Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture,

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely *nothing* can get between

us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us."

So even during these trying times, even during the darkest moments of our own lives, even when we may not have behaved as we should have, even when we feel alone, God's love for us continues and God holds us even when we may not be able to find the words to speak or pray, God knows what's on our hearts because the spirit is there in the midst of our breaths.

My cousin, the oldest of the 6 children, who is my age, struggled because her baby brother was dying and alone and she could not be with him. I told her that he is not alone. That I believe God is with him, even in those darkest moments, God never leaves. I told her that the love she and her siblings have for their baby brother was surrounding him. The love from his cousins and aunts and uncles and friends, it surrounded him, but most of all, I believe that God's love was present and filling his hospital room and that love and light and peace was with him as he journeyed from this life to the next. Because in the end, it is love that remains and absolutely nothing can separate us from God's love. As I told her this, she cried and between tears, she released a big sigh.