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Year A  
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*Gracious God, you have placed within the hearts of all your children a longing for your Word and a hunger for your truth. Grant that, believing in the One whom you have sent, we may know him to be the true bread of heaven and food of eternal life, Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom you and the Holy Spirit be glory and honor forever and ever. Amen.*

## **SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR WORDS**

**ROMANS 8:26-39**

Shhh...listen closely. Maybe you will hear a sigh. Or feel one...from the depths of Sheol. You are asked to listen closely, because sighs are barely audible. One has to be in tune with another's breathing to sense the uneasiness---the disruption---and then know something of the person's circumstances to understand why he or she is sighing. Of course, we sigh too; and it is incumbent upon each of us to listen to ourselves, to the rumblings within and to notice when our breathing becomes uneasy. As Ralph Waldo Emerson preached, riffing on ancient Greek philosophy, "Know thyself;" and as Ralph Waldo Trine wrote, one of the objectives of being human is being "in tune with the infinite."

Being in tune with one's self is difficult enough without bothering to know one's neighbor, and yet since the sigh of a neighbor is just as mysterious and revealing as ours, being in tune with another's thoughts and feelings helps us to interpret our experience and our relationship to the God who created us from the clay of the earth.

Warning: Body language is dangerous. It gives away thoughts and feelings that we may or may not be prepared to share. Then are there questions of interpretation. Granted, body language may be intentional. A police officer motions for one lane of traffic to stop while another goes (as was the case yesterday following a power outage downtown). Children (or adults) make bold pronouncements from bus windows like "We're number one" (*usually* with the index finger) or much more significantly, during the

Civil Rights Movement, when Rosa Parks said, “No, thank you. Even though you have reserved a seat back there for me, I prefer to sit here.”

But what about body language that is more subtle: the grimace on a child’s face when broccoli or lima beans are served; the person who is incapable of looking the other person in the eyes when answering a difficult question, one that calls for a lie? The possibility of reading something into one’s body language that is simply not there always exists. The problem may not be the broccoli or lima beans or the person who cooked them, and the person we fear is lying may be too shy or uncomfortable with the truth to look at us when answering the difficult question. Even so, in a world in which truth often is clouded by smoke and mirrors, body language proves helpful, because there are situations in which spoken and written languages are not enough. Language, spoken, written or kinesthetic, is limited, even more limited than the human beings who stumble through life using it.

The curriculum at Union-PSCE, the seminary that I attended in Charlotte, calls for participants in the M.Div. program to go through clinical practical education. I say “go through,” as if it is something to survive; and for many, it is, because it exposes students to some of the grittiest stuff that life has to offer. There is a strong psychological component to the process. Every five minutes, one has to respond to a litany of questions: What happened in there? How did you respond? How did you assess the situation? How do you feel? How do your feelings color your assessment of the situation? Who does this person represent to you? Is it a member of your family of origin? If so, who? And how is that relationship now? We, your peer group, are listening...

Of all the ways to travel through clinical practical education, an internship as a hospital chaplain proved to be the most practical for me (after all, it is supposed to be practical, isn’t it?). I had a marvelous supervisor. By “marvelous,” I mean that he recognized that I was coming from an academic background where feelings were secondary to thoughts and words. From the first day, he knew in his bones that the process intimidated me (in part, because I told him), and he proceeded with caution, always applying just enough pressure to help me to grow and to help others around me do likewise. One of the things that he

did for me, which I appreciate to this day, is that he encouraged me to apply literary categories to social situations, not because this is what he does or recommends to every person who passes through the hospital's doors but because he perceived this as a personal strength on which to build. He listened closely to discern the language that I spoke and then spoke it to me faithfully.

The first call of a drab morning was to visit a woman who had overdosed the night before. The experience was haunting. The darkness of the room was exaggerated by the brightness of the lights of the hospital corridor. The blinds were almost closed with maybe an inch of dim light on one end fading to nothing on the other. Before I went in, I asked the nurses if she was up for a visit. They told me, "Yes," but still I was unsure. I let in enough light to find my way to the edge of her bed. She seemed undisturbed by the light, and yet she did not appear to be nourished by it. I introduced myself and asked how I could be helpful. All I remember is the cadence of her speech, not what she said but how she said it, as if her spirit had left her body or had traded places with another. When I met with my supervisor that afternoon, he asked the litany of questions that he was supposed to ask, and when he asked me to describe the experience, I had only one word: cavernous. When I said that, my supervisor eased forward, placed his elbows on his knees and still found a way for his jaw to drop slightly. He had visited this woman and felt as if he had seen the ghost too, and neither of us was sure if it was holy.

Thus we arrive at Paul in Romans where the Spirit is at work, interceding for us with "sighs too deep for words." In the first paragraph of today's epistle reading, the Spirit helps; the Spirit intercedes. God, whom Paul differentiates from the Spirit, searches and knows. God searches the hearts of human beings and knows the mind of the Spirit. Human beings, even saintly ones, are subject to states of weakness in which they are incapable of prayer. Still, the Spirit is there for them---for us---not necessarily with profound theology or literature or liturgy but with sighs; sighs that are within and beyond us; sighs belonging to the Spirit that belongs to God. To me, there is comfort in knowing that this Spirit is the one who generates the sigh, because sighs, as I have experienced them, point to feelings of helplessness whether the unspoken prayer beneath them is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" or a hearty "Thanks be to God!"

Because the Spirit intercedes for us---because God's grace, mercy and peace are unleashed like a time-released capsule---in the magic moment of a sigh, we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, for those called according to God's purpose. At least Paul says that we know. Maybe we do, in the marrow of our bones, in the places where our sighs are stored, but it seems to me that doubt is part of being human. All things work together for good for those who love God? Only if we interpret goodness in terms of love and love in terms of the universe's mysterious design: For Paul, being loved is synonymous to being called, which for Jesus Christ leads to unmerited suffering and death, death that God transforms into life, life for Christ, life for you and life for me.

This passage from Romans is embarrassingly rich and marvelous Trinitarian. This particular Trinitarian structure is rare among early Christian writings, especially those canonized as Scripture, because it begins with the Spirit (almost an afterthought in John's Gospel), proceeds to the Creator and at last arrives at the Son (who restores the dignity of being firstborn that was jeopardized in the Hebrew Scriptures by the stories of Isaac, Esau and Benjamin). Paul introduces Jesus into this text as the one to whose image we are called to conform. Then Paul sets a hamster wheel in motion that consists of being predestined, called, justified and glorified (I know, I know...we have to be careful using language like "predestination" in a Presbyterian church, especially one as thoughtful as this one). Paul rehearses this litany before launching into a series of rhetorical questions, the answers to which are probably not as obvious to me---and maybe to you---as Paul would like for them to be.

If God is for us, who is against us? Hmm...where do we start: In which place and at what time? Will God, who did not withhold Jesus Christ, not also give us everything else? Only if we ask in terms commensurate with God's will. Who will bring any charge against God's elect? Uh...maybe God's elect. This is why the PC(USA) has a permanent judicial commission. The next set of questions has answers, and this set of questions and answers appear in our *Book of Common Worship* as an assurance of pardon that follows the confession of sin: "Who is to condemn? Christ, who died, was raised and is at the right side of God who intercedes for us." Intercedes: just like the Spirit?

The answers to the series of questions that follow appear in affirmations of faith, guides for faith and action, and as calls to worship in Services of Witness to the Resurrection, services in which congregations face the grim reality of death, sometimes grappling with questions like, “Do all things work together for good for those who love God?” Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? “No,” Paul pronounces, “In all these things we are more than conquerors (imperialists, exclusivists) through the one who loves us.” Paul is convinced that the state of being in which we find our bodies (neither life nor death), whether we are giving to God what belongs to God or to Caesar what belongs to Caesar (neither angels nor rulers) or the time and space that we occupy (neither things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation) will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

This is a statement of faith that echoes throughout the *Book of Confessions*. It is among the first sentences that come to mind when a person dies tragically or self-destructively. No, I am not going to start naming names, but I will tell you this: Months after I completed that hospital chaplaincy, the woman about whom I spoke---the woman who seemed so distant, so detached, even when standing by her bedside---died. There was a strange sense of mourning among those who followed her story, and for better or worse, a strange sense of relief that accompanied the lingering sadness that is a mark of addiction. Why did she suffer? Why did she die? Because she was human: Why do we suffer? Why do we die? Because we are too: God is always speaking to us, even when we would rather not hear it. No, we do not always know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit helps. It intercedes with grace and mercy and blessings and sighs, sighs too deep for words. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God’s judgments and how inscrutable God’s ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen.