

Sighs Too Deep for Words

Romans 8:26-27

Sept. 18, 2011

Sometimes words are not enough. Sometimes words are irrelevant. Sometimes words are inadequate and even inappropriate. They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Last Thursday some of us went to a church in Brookfield to pack meals for the hungry in Haiti. At one work station for volunteers, Diane Smith stood behind two plastic bins, one with a chicken-flavored powder and the other with dehydrated vegetables. She used a long-handled ladle to put a measured amount of powder and then dried veggies into a plastic bag, along with rice and soy protein, ably scooped by Joyce and then Alice.

The long-handled ladle reminded me of the old story about the subtle differences between paradise and perdition. A man dies and goes to a bright and shining place at the end of a long dark tunnel. At the end are two doors, side by side. St Peter and Satan surprise him by standing at the two doors. As the man approaches, both Peter and Satan open their respective doors and invite the man to look inside. The man is further surprised to see two similar scenes: down a long corridor is a vast banquet hall with tables laden with delicious looking and elegantly served foods of all kinds. "Why, these scenes look the same to me," the man said. Peter said, "Take another look." Closer inspection revealed that the diners arms, wrists and hands had become extremely long utensils, on the end of one long arm was an equally long fork and on the end of the other long arm an equally long knife. This was true for diners in both paradise and perdition. But there was a difference in the two scenes. After some scrutiny, the man clearly heard that from the banquet hall of hell there were moans and groans and nobody was able to eat any of the delicious and elegant food, because diners could not get the food to their mouth. They just made a hopeless mess of things and were tortured by the wonderful smells and appetizing appearance

of the most bountiful meal that any had ever seen. At the banquet hall of heaven, on the other hand, the diners were enjoying themselves and the delicious and elegant food because they had found that their long arms allowed them to reach across the large banquet table and feed one another.

Paul writes about a broken and suffering world eagerly waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled. We have explored parts of Romans chapter eight earlier this year, talking about how creation longs for the birth of God's promised new world the way a pregnant woman longs for her baby to be born. The words of one translation, "eagerly waiting", are a serious understatement, because the expression Paul uses in his Greek manuscript are closer to "labor pains." The creation groans as it pushes to bring that fetus down the birth canal to infancy. The world as we know it, marred by the images of World Trade Center towers smoking and about to collapse, is not the best of all possible worlds. Biblically speaking, there is always something better coming, in God's good time, and in fulfillment of God's promises: when the wolf dwells with the lamb, the child plays over the adder's den, and the mountains and the trees clap their hands. The glory of the Lord is risen upon us, as the prophets proclaim in our Advent scripture readings before Christmas. Or, as one African American preacher put it on Good Friday: it's Friday, but Sunday's a-comin'!

We live in a world where there are already long forks strapped to our hands and though the banquet is bodacious, we cannot feed ourselves. But a new world is coming: A world where hungry people learn that if they feed others, they too will be fed. As we long for this new world, we groan in travail, we cry out in childbirth, and sometimes there just aren't the words to say what needs to be said. In the last several weeks many words have been used, written and spoken and read and heard, to try to express the grief of a nation ten years ago last Sunday. Some of the words had to do with innocence lost, the idea that the United States of America had never before suffered such an attack on its own shores (for Pearl Harbor in Hawaii was not yet a state in 1941). But, now with these coordinated acts of terrorism, we have reluctantly joined the many

other nations of the world that have long known that there is no hiding place, no safe haven from invasion, even in this “sea to shining sea” nation, nestled between Atlantic and Pacific ocean buffers. Here was a chink in our armor of exceptionalism, the myth that says we are different from and better than all other nations, operating with God’s unique blessing and manifest destiny.

Many of the words uttered in recent weeks have suggested that September 11, 2001 was our wake up call, and that our decline and vulnerability as a nation could now be turned around by making some kind of turn from the path we were on. This way of thinking has gotten us into two wars of retaliation and is responsible for many times the number of deaths from those hijacked airliners in New York, the Pentagon and Pennsylvania. There is a good argument to be made that this kind of thinking has also contributed to our current economic and political mess.

Perhaps the Apostle Paul, here in this astonishing chapter eight of his letter to the Romans, has something profoundly different to say to us.

That is, in the midst of the many words of a long and sometimes rambling letter, St Paul hits the nail squarely on the head when he says that our words are inadequate. But that’s not a bad thing because our speechlessness enables the Holy Spirit to speak for us. Our inability to know how to pray or what to pray for sets the stage for the Spirit to pray for us, to intercede on our behalf.

We know that all creation is still groaning and is in pain, like a woman about to give birth. The Spirit makes us sure about what we will be in the future. But now we groan silently, while we wait for God to show that we are his children... And this hope is what saves us. But if we already have what we hope for, there is no need to keep on hoping. However, we hope for something we have not yet seen, and we patiently wait for it. In certain ways, we are weak, but the Spirit is here to help us. For example, when we don't know what to pray for, the Spirit prays for us in ways that cannot be put into words...
(Contemporary English version, Romans 8:22-27)

The RSV had the “ways that cannot be put into words” as “sighs too deep for human words.” That’s the Spirit’s language. Too deep for our language. Beyond us. Even better than the thousand words of a picture. Sometimes, like the Quakers, we need to meet in silence and wait for the Spirit. The (cap “w”) Word needs no embellishment by our little, lower case words. The Word made flesh is action and deed, quite apart from our conviction and creed. The one Word is not to be confused with our many words. Though our human words sometimes die of inaction, duller than a butter knife, the Word of God’s Spirit is alive and active, sharper than any two edged sword.

Ironically, I had an awful time crafting these few meager words based on this text that says the Spirit helps us in our weakness. The crisp fall days and nights trigger in me an insatiable appetite for building a shed for my woodpile and lawnmower and trailer, and being outdoors and not thinking too much about church or anything having to do with the discipline of sitting down at a desk and reading and thinking and writing. I waited until late in the week to get ready for this morning and counted on the Spirit to bail me out.

But the Spirit wasn’t getting through to me. Or more accurately, my spirit was not in synch with the Holy Spirit. Then I realized that inattention, laziness and distraction are not the same thing as active waiting, eager longing, and the groaning and pain of a woman about to give birth. One of the occupational hazards of a pastor, not unlike those of other professions, is that if you want to just get the job done, the job will be a pain, and getting it done will not be satisfying. Just getting a bulletin and sermon done is the wrong way to approach it. You have to want to say something first. You have to have some fire in the belly, some passion of the heart to deliver a message and shape an experience of worship for the people of God whom you love and lead, but of which you are also a part. Going through the motions never works in this business called ministry.

One of the redeeming facts of this calling, however, is that the Spirit does indeed step in sometimes and do your job for you. When you least expect it, the Spirit sometimes gives you something worthwhile to say. When you have (using an obsolete metaphor here) filled the wastebasket with mostly blank, crumpled typing paper, the Spirit

sometimes takes over and you find your fingers tapping keys to make words that you did not know you had in you. Most miraculously, the dud sermon that you bring out and deliver with desperation and even embarrassment, turns out to touch someone and they tell you so.

The good news today is that a new world is coming. The earth is full of the glory of God already, if we can just see it, but an even more glorious world is yet to be. This is not the best of all possible worlds. Picture a world where people feed one another, clumsy long arms notwithstanding. The center of the universe, I am relieved to announce, is not me and my problems. The center of the universe is God, God who is love, God who has loved us so much that the only thing we can do is love back. The trigger for this new world of God's love is not up to you or me either. All we can do is groan and push as the Spirit brings this child to birth. This is the good news, the Word made flesh that cannot be put into words.