

Homily, St. Andrew's
Pentecost 7, Proper 17A - July 27, 2014
Romans 8:26-39

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

I was once in a grocery store line-up when a lady waiting in front of me turned around and said: "boy... that sounded heavy." Snapping out of a daze, I think I responded with something like, "huh?" "You just let out a big sigh..." she told me, "it sounded heavy." I hadn't heard myself - I hadn't even realized I'd sighed... have you ever done that? Likely the answer is "yes," even if you can't remember it, because it's so often the kind of thing we don't realize. <sigh> That experience was a long time ago and I don't remember what was going on in my life at the time. I suspect I was stressed, exhausted, something... and I have always been grateful to that stranger in the line for reminding me that when we're having a hard time, and "we do not know how to pray as we ought," the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, "with sighs too deep for words."

This is, of course, a part of the passage we hear today from Romans and it is one of my all-time favourites! I might say it would be a passage on my personal "top 10" list of favourite bible passages, but I suspect there would be more than 10 passages on that top 10 list! At any rate, Romans chapter 8 is truly glorious and so let's spend a little time with it this morning.

This passage from Paul's letter to the Romans is the end of a major section of the letter. As such, it brings together several of the themes that Paul has been writing about in the past several chapters in a glorious summary statement. Listen to the introduction to the section, the beginning of chapter 5, as it identifies these themes, also in a summary fashion: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand: and we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (5:1-5) "Spirit; hope; suffering; glory; love: these are the themes, stated in advance at the head of the argument, to which Paul has now worked his way back," from the beginning of chapter 5, to today's passage at the end of chapter 8. (NIB, 590)

Along the way, Paul has written about God's great love embodied in Jesus' death and resurrection; Jesus' reversal of Adam's sin and its effects; Christian freedom from sin, the law and death itself; the life-giving leading of the Spirit; and the hope, even during suffering, enjoyed by God's people. One scholar suggests that the connecting point in all this, the understanding of salvation that Paul is writing about, is a re-framing of the ancient Israelite story of the exodus. In other words, believing in Jesus and living the Christian life is about a new exodus from the bonds of slavery. In the ancient Israelite tradition that we know from our Old Testament, the exodus is the most core story about moving from a life being overtaken with death to renewed, true life with God. The first incarnation of the story was in leaving slavery in Egypt for the Promised Land. A second incarnation occurred when the Persian Empire overtook Babylon and the Israelites returned to Jerusalem following the destruction and exile imposed by Babylon. And now with Jesus comes a new exodus, another renewal, of life with God.

Considering this overarching story, it begs the question: what is the death, the spirit of slavery, from which we need to be saved today? What is the new exodus that we need to be free today? What is the nature of our suffering and what might freedom from it look like? In our own personal lives, it is up to each of us to consider what the answers are to those questions. It is only in fierce, courageous personal reflection that we can discern what God's call to life means now. It may be something obvious, like an illness or some other hardship, but it also may be something more nebulous and difficult to put one's finger on. In our corporate life together as the parish of St. Andrew's, it's also worth considering from what we may be called away from. Is there something that enslaves this parish? Typically in the average Anglican church, it might be something like "the budget," or "the way we've always done things," or "our bad location," or any other number of things to which we feel enslaved. In our contemporary culture in general, I tend to think it's consumerism... treating everything and maybe even everyone, as though they are a commodity to be bought and sold. Like those ancient Israelites, after a few steps into the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, we might think that our old life of slavery looks better than the unknown renewed life promised by God. Today's passage in Paul is one that encourages us otherwise. Today's passage is about our guaranteed inheritance as children of God and the worth of following through, of keeping going, all the way to the Promised Land.

Paul has already offered the encouragement that [quote] "... you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption." (8:15) And just last week, in circling back to the theme of suffering, Paul began this final statement about the renewal of all things by stating that "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." (8:18) And after describing the groanings not just of humanity but of the whole of creation, Paul today reminds us that we are never alone in our troubles, because "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

There have been lots of things to sigh about recently. I think we're up to 3 plane crashes in past couple of weeks, including, of course, the commercial plane getting shot down over Ukraine. There's been the disappearance and murder of a small child and grandparents right here in Calgary, along with other local violence and crime. And then there's wars and rumours of wars - in Russia and Ukraine, and the worst this week clearly being the escalation of violence between Israel and Palestine focussed on the people of Gaza. The bad news seems particularly bad this summer and yet I suspect it's very often so - between the natural and human-made disasters that too often characterize our world. The worst part is that most of the bad to which we bear witness these days is completely out of our control. And so we pray... or we try to pray, but in many cases, like with the complicated and historic problems between Palestine and Israel... do we really have any idea how to pray? Is there really any salvation to be had?

That is why I love this passage from Romans so very much: "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." <sigh> Let's all give it a try... take a deep breath in and then just let it go... <big sigh> I think we can do better... try lifting your shoulders, and making a little noise, or maybe even a lot of groaning... a big, deep, ugly kind of sigh <bigger sigh!> It may not be pretty. It may not be sensible. But it is the Spirit of God, dwelling within each one of us, interceding with God for the salvation of the world, in ways we cannot even articulate. It seems to me to be the ultimate comfort that as children of God, we don't even have to get praying right. A dying person... a very small child... someone in the midst of the worst grief imaginable... we

can all groan and sigh. And Paul goes on: "God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." That is hope. That is good news. Even better - it doesn't end there.

Paul continues to the end of the chapter with the encouragement and the hope that no matter the circumstance, in the end, love wins. Paul uses rhetorical questions beautifully to bring together the themes of several chapters and make the points again: "If God is for us, who is against us?" For God sent his own son to embody love. "Who is to condemn?" When God justifies. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" God knows suffering... God lives suffering and so God is with us. "Spirit; hope; suffering; glory; love: these are the themes..." of Paul that we hear today and that assure us "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."

I have always been grateful that a stranger once heard the Spirit of God praying in and through me, and had the courage to point it out to me when I was too tired or too worried or too sad or too... whatever to hear it myself. My prayer, my sigh, for each of you today is that you too may know such grace and offer such grace to someone else. In the very least, let us take heart each day in remembering that in the beginning, God created us in love; and in the end, we are "more than conquerors through him who loved us." And may we take the peace and the confidence this gives us and strive to pass it on those who need it the most. Nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, and so we can live boldly today and everyday.