

## Words on Wordlessness

Julia Powers

Preached at Duke Divinity School Oct. 2, 2017

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 18-27.

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise 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. And 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.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Would you pray with me?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

\*\*\*

It was sophomore year of college and my friend Alex had just sent me this text message: “I need to talk to someone. Can we meet up? Soon please.”

I knew he had been having a hard time. Several weeks prior, a classmate of ours had passed away from suicide, and Alex had been thrown into an ocean of grief, guilt, and even questions about death and the afterlife.

But that evening when I met Alex on campus he couldn’t articulate any of that. He had wanted to talk to someone...but couldn’t get the words out. We sat there for ten minutes in almost total silence.

Until eventually I said quietly, “Use your words, Alex. Just one word. Or a few. Otherwise, I don’t know how to help you.”

He said just a little. And I remember a lot. Not a lot of words. But a lot of Holy Spirit hovering somewhere around our lack of words.

When I think of this passage from Romans 8 that we’re looking at today, there’s a number of images that come to my mind.

For instance, I joked with a friend once that maybe these “sighs,” also sometimes translated as “groanings,” too deep for words are like the character Dory in the movie *Finding Nemo* trying to speak “whale” language. In several scenes, Dory intones her voice in all kinds of

exaggerated ways. All the while, she harbors this seemingly naïve faith that the whales will understand her...and lo and behold, they do. The metaphor kind of works.

On a more serious note, I've heard it said on occasion that these sighs or groans represent praying in tongues or "praying in the Spirit," understood differently by different people.

But, when I really think about this text, I see much more than "whale" language, more even than a prayer language, and more about what happens when we *don't have the language* for what we're experiencing.

Have you ever been there? Maybe sitting on your couch watching a tragedy unfold on the news – like even what's happened in Las Vegas today – or sitting with a grieving person during your Field Ed or CPE or in your own personal life. *I can't believe it*, you say, *there are no words*, ironically using words to describe your feeling of wordlessness because that's simply the best that our human limitations can muster.

*There are no words. Just sighs too deep for words.*

I wonder, psychologically, what kinds of conditions can render us speechless in this way? What life circumstances have the power to take away our words and reduce usually articulate, even *verbose* people like the apostle Paul into *sighs* and *groans*?

I see at least three ways to consider the experience of speechlessness.

We can be *stunned* speechless, standing in awe of God or God's creation, of sunsets or oceans or acts of kindness. We smile and let out a *sigh too deep for words*.

We can also be *depressed* into speechlessness; after all, decreased social connectivity – including communication with friends, family, and I would say *God* – is among the chief symptoms of clinical depression. We hide away and maybe cry and let out a *sigh too deep for words*.

Finally, and related to being *depressed*, people can be *oppressed* into speechlessness. Deeply, daily, this is one big *sigh too deep for words*.

It's this last condition – oppression – that I'd like to focus on the most today.

Dr. Christie Cozad Neuger, a scholar of pastoral care and counseling, spends a great deal of time in her book *Counseling Women* describing the cultural phenomenon of "women's loss of voice" and emphasizing the role of pastors, counselors, and hopefully *all of us* in "helping women come to voice." To be sure, the struggle of voicelessness and the process of coming to voice is experienced not only by women but by all manner of minority persons whether ethnic, racial, sexual, socioeconomic, or otherwise. Neuger describes the frequency with which minorities have no voice for making narrative, cohesive sense of some of their experiences as well as the frequency with which minorities are not heard even when they do speak up and not believed even when they are heard.

In the example of a sexual assault survivor, for instance, of which I am one to be quite honest, she would statistically be very likely to experience some of the following: 1) A sense of shock, shame, or intimidation that locks her into silence during and after the initial impact – a silence around this topic lasting for hours, days, months, or even years; 2) Difficulty identifying someone willing and able to listen; 3) Difficulty being believed by friends, family, media, and the legal system who say that she's exaggerating, seeking attention, or "was asking for it."

There's a reason that trauma studies have often used the language of "saying the unsayable" or "bearing the unbearable."

*There are no words. Just sighs too deep for words.*

This, my friends, is precisely where the Holy Spirit comes in.

The Holy Spirit who helps us in our weakness. In our sighs and groans. In the speechlessness of sublime joy, of deep depression, or of systemic oppression. And, yes, also in the wordless writer's block of the divinity student writing theology midterms.

*How exactly does the Holy Spirit help us in these times?*

Well, twice just in these few verses from Romans 8, Paul repeats that the Spirit intercedes.

And what does *that* mean? According to Merriam Webster, to intercede means to go between, coming straight from the Latin roots "inter" meaning between and "cede" meaning go. The Holy Spirit *goes between* us and God. This means that the Spirit understands us and, with that understanding, speaks to God or you might even say *advocates* to God on our behalf. The Spirit connects me to God, you to God, us to God. The Spirit runs through our veins like a telephone wire telling God who we are, what we feel, what we think, what we need – even or perhaps *especially* when we can't quite find the words to understand it or say it ourselves.

What does this mean for the oppressed? For the trauma survivor that I spoke of earlier? This means that God, through the Holy Spirit, understands her story, her personhood, her cries and sighs.

This means that God longs for us who are survivors to come to voice – not just on our own in our wordless weakness but in the power of the Spirit.

This means, too, that God longs for us who are *not* ourselves oppressed to come to voice *on behalf of* the oppressed – again not just in our wordless, shrugging, "what can I do?" kind of weakness but in the power of the Spirit.

I think of my friend Alex back in college and what I told him at the time: "Use your words. Just a few. Otherwise, I don't know how to help you."

For me and Alex, with our human limitations, that was true. We need language – at least in some form and to some extent – to understand one another.

But God?

God is not limited to language in the way that we are. God's ways are "higher than our ways."

So, with Romans 8 in mind, I imagine God saying to Alex – and to us: "Don't worry about your words – or lack thereof. I welcome your silence. When you're ready, I'll welcome your words. Wherever you're at, I welcome you. By the Holy Spirit, I know you and know how to help you."

I used to think this passage in Romans was an excuse to stop trying when praying is kinda hard. As though it says with a shrug, "Don't know how to pray? That's OK. Just take it easy. Sigh. Groan. Whatever."

But now, even in preparing for today's sermon, I've realized this passage is an invitation not to stop trying but to stop trying *so hard on my own, leaning on my own strength*, when praying is kinda hard.

On our own? Sometimes *there's no words. Just sighs too deep for words.*

But with the Spirit? Those sighs can start to shift from voices being *depressed* or *oppressed* in this world toward voices being *expressed* in the Spirit. May we take up this invitation and join in this liberation.

Amen.