

“Once there was a pastor who always preached for twenty minutes. One day she got up and said that there was no word from the Lord today. The people all got mad, and they said they’d cut her pay. The next Sunday she talked for twenty minutes. They forgave her and promised she could stay. Now there is a committee that makes sure that the Word of the Lord is said each week. They all like her now!”

This story (perhaps parable) written by Herb Brokering obviously is poking fun at the church which sometimes lacks spontaneity, doesn’t really listen to the Spirit of God, and thinks that organization is the means to solve all problems. I appreciate the critique, but what most interested me in the story this week is its emphasis on the significance of speech, words. The pastor was hired to speak words for twenty minutes, or at least that was the view of the congregation.

I often tell people that I get paid for thinking, which is part of the reason I have so few practical skills, or at least that is the excuse I come up with. People pay me to think and to allow those thoughts to become words. Much of what I do entails wordsmithing, giving expression to thought.

More than 20 years ago I was invited to preside over the funeral of four people who had been shot to death by a member of their own family. A fifth young woman was killed in this horrific crime, but my friend John led that funeral. The Muskegon Chronicle covered the funeral and quoted my words on the front page of the paper. What I had to say was primarily, “There’s nothing worthwhile that anyone can say on a day like this.” I remember sitting with the remnant of the family of those murdered thinking, “I’ve got nothing to say.” Oh, I could try that, but that seemed cheap. Oh, I could try this, but this would be trite. Believe it or not, even though I get paid to speak, there are times when I don’t know what to say.

Early on here at First, I was called to the hospital to be with a family whose loved one was just involved in a horrible accident. The man was taken into surgery, and the future for him looked grim. I sat with the family, and no words came to mind. Yes, after he died, I uttered some kind of prayer that was a feeble attempt to articulate what can't be articulated. I know, because of later reflection on the part of a member of the family, that the family or at least the woman wondered what kind of pastor I was in light of the absence of words from me. Aren't pastors supposed to come in and speak words that will provide comfort and healing? I didn't know what to say. Every word seemed ridiculous. If I was paid to speak, you all should have fired me at that point.

"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."

Wow! These are some of the most powerful words in all the Bible. For many people, religion is about what we do for God, how we behave, how we develop a good prayer life, how we manage our money, how we raise a good family. Much of the preaching I hear on television, the radio, or even on Facebook or You Tube is all about what we must do for God, must do to be all in, must do to be faithful disciples. Now don't get me wrong. That is good and important stuff sometimes. I am a big promoter of discipline and the practices of the faith. They have served me well. But Paul's vision throughout the book of Romans, and especially in his words today about prayer, puts that approach to faith in some kind of healthy perspective. I've said it many times before: it isn't all about us.

Paul says that we don't even know how to do the simplest of things—pray. Oh, it's not that we don't know the motions of prayer. We probably can go through the motions, sometimes without even thinking. We can even utter some pious sounding words. But the truth is that sometimes our spirits, in our emptiness, in our weakness don't even know where to begin in addressing God. We are more than at a loss for words. We stand empty before God and sometimes even before life. My friend Mary Hinkle-Shore suggests that the effect of Paul's words about prayer in Romans today is not so much that we cannot come up with the words, but that at times we don't even know what we want.

Oh, man. I get it. I appreciate our first reading for today that depicts Solomon, a very mixed character, by the way, from a Biblical perspective, as one who knows that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. I appreciate that Solomon knew what he wanted. He didn't want fame, fortune, or riches. He wanted an understanding mind, a listening heart. He wanted wisdom. I'm happy for him, but sometimes I must admit I don't know what that means. I want wisdom. But what does wisdom mean? Life is so doggone complicated sometimes that I don't know what I want.

My wife gets mad at me because she will say "what do you want for dinner?" and I will say, "I don't know." If I don't know what I want for dinner, how can I know what I want in so many more complicated places and many more difficult decisions. Too often not only do I not know how to pray, but I also don't know what I want.

"The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, [we don't know what we want], but God's Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. The Spirit intercedes for the saints."

For me, there are almost no more powerful gospel words in the Bible than these. It is so much not about me or you that even the simplest of religious actions we can't do, but the Spirit of God does on our behalf. The Spirit prays for us, and Paul says, with sighs too deep for words. Through our longing, our groaning, our sighing, our aching, our wondering, our wandering, the Spirit prays for us.

That's wild, and truthfully, life-giving stuff. We often think that it is our goal to get rid of the longings, get rid of the sighs, squelch the groans, stop the wondering and wandering, eliminate the aching. And yes, sometimes a healthy life entails having the longings met and the wanderings stopped. Some people wander their whole lives and never get anyplace. You'll notice that the people of God wandered for forty years in the wilderness, *but* they finally arrived in the Promised Land. The wandering came to an end, at least in part. Yet it took a long time.

The groans and the sighs, the wonderings and the wanderings—they are not bad. They can be the means by which God prays for us. Sometimes words are empty. Sometimes all you can do is sigh, groan, or cry, question, or hold other people's hands. And that may feel like weakness. That may feel like vulnerability. And it is. If the cross tells us anything, it lets us know that God is present in vulnerability, that God's strength is most apparent in weakness. You don't have to run from your weakness. You don't have to pretend that you always know what to say. You can sigh. You can groan. You can shout at the air. God's Spirit is praying on your behalf with sighs too deep for words.

For you see, the Spirit of God, God himself is not against you. Using courtroom language, Paul says, "If God is for us, who is against us?" Paul knew many people who were against him. He had lots of enemies, lots of people who wanted to ruin his reputation, and stop his work. But he trusted that God was not against him. God is not against you. God who is for you. "Who will bring any charge against God's

elect? It is God who justifies. You don't justify yourself. Others don't justify you. Justification belongs to God.

"Who is to condemn?" Not God. It is Christ Jesus, whom Paul says is reigning with God, who intercedes for us, who prays on our behalf. God is for us, so for us that nothing in all of life can separate us from the love which God has for us in Christ Jesus. Nothing at all. Not garden variety suffering or big-time suffering. Not death. Not evil powers. Nothing! God is for us.

For me, that is the heart of the matter. For me, that is the small seed that becomes a tree that the birds of the air can come and make a nest in. For me, that is the pearl of great price. For me, that is the treasure hidden in a field worth selling all to find, or to be found by. For me, that is the really good good news that frees us to sigh, to groan, to not know what to say, to allow the Spirit of God to pray for us.