



From the Rev. Adam D. Gorman; July 30, 2017;  
11 a.m. Brick Presbyterian Church Service of Worship

### *God's Embrace*

Lord, through Your Spirit that dwells among us and inside of us, calm our hearts and minds so that we may hear what you want us to hear and know what you want us to know. In your wonderful Son Jesus Christ's name we pray, amen.

What does it mean to sigh or groan? Sighing and groaning are natural reactions and sounds we make when we face despair. "Groaning is a deep, inward response to suffering. It is both personal and intense, an agony so deep it cannot be put into words. Groaning is a universal language.... [However,] for the Christian, groaning [can] direct our hope heavenward to that which is not yet seen....." Therefore, sighing or groaning, is a prayer, a prayer beyond prayer, a prayer sent to God through the actions of the Holy Spirit when we are in most need.

So as opposed to sighing just being a sound that is wind escaping ones lungs as a response to agony, we are being taught in today's text that it can be a prayer to God, brought through to God, by the Spirit. That even though for many a sigh can be an inward groan of despair, for the Christian it can be an outward prayer that God hears through the Spirit.

This scripture says that in our weakness of not knowing how to pray as we ought, the Spirit intercedes with a “deep inarticulate sound in response to [our] pain or [our] despair” and that it is from our hearts to God’s ears.

This sigh or groan is the sound one hears when they sit on the deathbed of a dying person. Or it is the whimper one hears emitting from their spouse each morning when their alarm clock goes off and they have to face another day at a job they despise. Or it is a cry that can be heard by a parent from one of their children’s rooms, from a kid who has to go back to camp, to where they know they will be bullied once again. Or it is the sigh of a person who has to face another day without their loved one. Or it is the groan of a kid who has to go back to school and to struggle with their learning differences in what feels like a world of students who have it all together and so easy. Or it is the deep exhalation of one’s breath just having to face another day and needing to find the energy to do so. Or it is the lamentation radiating from someone in the middle of the evening when they are unable to sleep and they face another restlessness night.

But today we are being reminded that whatever it is that someone is going through, that brings them to the point of groaning, the Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us in our connection with God. That God hears those sighs, those cries, those moans and those groans. Those painful times that are so raw we can hardly put words to them, it is then

that the Spirit intercedes for us lifting up our cries to God so that we are not alone.

The Scripture says, “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.”

That is a wonderful and reassuring thing to know. It is something that brings great peace to those who know God. When someone is in such bad shape, in such deep pain or discomfort, when their heart hurts because it is so full of sadness or depression, it is powerful to know that God hears that pain, that God feels that pain, that in some ways perhaps God pulls that pain out of them, out of us. He draws it out through the power of the Spirit, the Spirit who is our tether to God, who intercedes and lifts up our pain to God. Our plea that we cannot even put words to, because we do not know what to say, how to say it, or where to turn, is heard by God and lifted up by God.

An example of what today’s scripture is saying can be found in a song sung by Amy Grant called “Better than a Hallelujah.” While the words are read for you, please reflect on Miss Grants song with today’s scripture lesson on your heart as well. Reflect on and recognize what it may mean to you, as an individual, to have the Holy Spirit intercede on your behalf to God with sighs too deep for words. Think about what might

be on your heart that is so deep, so painful, so cutting, that it's hard to put words to. Something that you can give to God, and that the Spirit can lift up to God, so that you may rest them on Christ's shoulders, and be at peace.

The song says,

God loves a lullaby  
In a mothers tears in the dead of night  
Better than a Hallelujah sometimes.  
God loves a drunkards cry,  
The soldiers plea not to let him die  
Better than a Hallelujah sometimes.

We pour out our miseries  
God just hears a melody  
Beautiful the mess we are  
The honest cries of breaking hearts  
Are better than a Hallelujah.

The woman holding on for life,  
The dying man giving up the fight  
Are better than a Hallelujah sometimes  
The tears of shame for what's been done,  
The silence when the words won't come  
Are better than a Hallelujah sometimes.

Better than a church bell ringing,  
Better than a choir singing out, singing out.  
We pour out our miseries  
God just hears a melody  
Beautiful the mess we are

The honest cries of breaking hearts  
Are better than a Hallelujah.

I share this with you because I think we can all relate. That this song can put to words, or to mind, situations we have been in where our words would not come but that God has heard them anyway. Where the guttural groans of baffled or tortured hearts and minds are turned into beautiful hymns to the ears of God. For God so loves us that He gave His only Son for us and wants nothing more than to be loved by us and to comfort us. To bring peace to our hearts, and minds, and souls. This song is a reminder that God is always with us, that through the Spirit of God, we are known by God, and that when we cry out God hears those cries.

Today's scripture lesson also tells us that God has called each of us into being. He has brought us forth through His creation and he has justified us through Christ. Through Christ we have been forgiven of our sins and we are freely justified in Him so that we can become more righteous in the eyes of God. We can continue to become better and better people, sanctified by the Holy Spirit and glorified by God becoming more and more like Him. That through the example we have been given of in Christ we can be conformed to the image of God's Son. That we have all been called, justified and glorified and therefore, as today's scripture says, "God is for us."

So "If God is for us, who is against us?"

“Who [or what] will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” Will cancer, terrorism, health issues, anxiety, depression, loss of a job, inability to pay bills, drug addiction, alcoholism, hunger . . . or death be able to separate us from the love of Christ? No.

No, rather in our despair and in the ordinary, when times are good and when times are tough, we need to remember that God is with us and is for us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. And the simple reminder of us NOT being alone in this world is empowering enough as it is. Knowing that we are not alone, that God is with us, is power in itself. Just think of how much more we overcome and prevail when we choose to allow God to help us through the tough times and to celebrate with us during the good times. In that, there is both human and divine help and intervention. Today’s scripture says that through Christ, who died, who was raised, and who sits at the right hand of God we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us and that none of these things can separate us from the love that God has for us.

Imagery that comes to mind is the warm embrace of a prayer shawl such as the ones our Prayer Shawl ladies stitch and pray over for members of our church. They make them for people who are going through difficult times and good times alike. And through the power of the Spirit, God hears the nearly silent prayers as the knitter breathes them for the recipient of her latest shawl – and God also hears the prayers she says for herself

and her loved ones during that time. The beneficiary of the shawl becomes comforted in God's outstretched arms as exemplified in the shawl by the thought of being surrounded by prayers, by being intertwined with God's people, by being wrapped in God's love through human hands and through their hearts. Often, they become more than conquerors of whatever their hardship may be through Him who loves them.

The shawl is a symbol of God's embrace. It is the reminder of God's love swaddling a baby. The shawl is a representation of God's love surrounding a person who has lost a loved one. It is a tangible expression of God's love around the neck of a dying person, finding warmth when their own body can no longer provide heat for them. It is a demonstration of God's presence and love resting upon the shoulders of a nervous and excited bride ready to be wed to her husband. It is the peace one finds in God as they tightly grasp at their shawl and pull it hard around their neck.

In a shawl, one can find comfort and strength in God when all they have is the remembrance of the earthly father they have lost. It becomes a reminder that their heavenly and earthly fathers are looking down on them. The shawl, representing the yoke of the Heavenly Father, becomes a manifestation of the feeling and sensation of one releasing their own yoke or burden to God. It becomes a freedom and peace as one is reminded of their tether to God's love and warm embrace.

We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us!

Another representation of this never ending, uninteruptable, love that God has for us can be found in an example I often share in Confirmation Class. Often times the youth have many profound questions; many of the same ones that we all have. And nearly every year there comes a time when someone in class asks if there are any unforgivable sins. Or other times someone believes they are not worthy of God's love for one reason or another. Or they've done too many "bad" things and God wouldn't love them anymore. Or they ask if there is anything they can do that would warrant God not loving them or accepting them anymore. It is then that I stand up in front of the class and produce an image for them of how great God's love is for them and for us.

I take two chairs and place them in front of the class and I have the chairs facing each other. Then I explain to them that in one of the chairs sits God and in the other sits each of them. That God's chair is immovable. It is stationary, never turning, never wavering, just as God's love never turns away from us. I explain, that time and again, we as people, we turn our backs on God (and in that moment I turn their chair away from God), and I say that no matter how many times we turn our backs on God, or try and shut God out, that God never stops loving us, never stops reaching out to us with open arms, never stops wanting us to turn toward Him, to accept His embrace and to love him back. God is always there for us; no matter if we believe it or not, want Him or not. He wants nothing more than for us to know that we are loved by Him. And

for us to choose to love Him back. To accept God's warm embrace. To be nurtured by Him and to be changed by a relationship with Him.

In Romans Paul reminds us today "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." Again, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Nothing. No hardship or struggle, no trial or pain, no poor decision or choice, no sin is too far beyond, nor any sadness too deep, for God's love. No distress, no anxiety, no persecution, no famine, no loss of job or sense of security, no job or career, no difficulty or burden, no thought will ever allow you to go beyond God's love.

Therefore, cry out to God and always remember that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness and though we do not know how to pray as we ought, the very Spirit intercedes for you with sighs too deep for words. God is with you and nothing can separate you from God's love.

Therefore, know that you are loved by God, and in that, be at peace. Amen.