

When Everything We Say Seems Tone Deaf

Romans 8:18-26

September 6, 2020

La Verne Church of the Brethren

To be tone deaf means that all notes sound the same to you — you are insensitive to the differences in musical pitch. Accusations about people being tone deaf during this pandemic; this election; this renewed call for racial justice are being flung left and right.

I think quite a bit of what we are all saying these days is tone deaf. Everything I used to talk about seems trivial in this changed world. With the enormity of what is happening around us it is hard to even speak without being insensitive to the differences in pitch. I know I am worried about my words. Like when I say how disappointed I am that I'm not leaving in a couple weeks to walk the Camino in Spain. When I hear myself say that out loud I wonder if it sounds selfish to those who are dealing with Covid-19 in their families or have a loved one in a skilled nursing center where they aren't allowed to go see them. When I admit how much I want to check out from the news so I don't have to watch the world implode, I realize that the idea I could just check out shows my privilege. When someone says to me, "I'm actually enjoying the pandemic" I wonder if they know how that sounds to someone who has lost a job or lost a family member to Covid or is working on the front lines of this mess. When I hear a white person say, "I don't know why we are talking about racism. We don't have that problem here," I wonder if they have asked a person of color how their words land.

So, I have become quieter during this time. I don't want to get it wrong or be tone deaf or trivial or insensitive. There is too much new suffering and suffering that is finally being recognized. I don't want to add to it.

I even find it hard to pray. So much of what I want to say to God right now seems minor in this unprecedented time. I find it hard to even formulate the language of prayer. Isla Morley's new book, *The Last Blue*, gave me language for what I'm experiencing when it comes to prayer. One of her characters, Jubilee, is watching the gut-wrenching grief of her father and she puts her hand on his shoulder to pray but the words won't come. Jubilee thinks to herself, "It's not how they say, a person quits praying. It's the other way around. The prayer quits the person." I have become quieter with everyone around me...even with God. Words seem inadequate, insensitive and inaccessible. Instead I have started following the prayer practice of Fred Rogers. I simply speak aloud the names and situations on my prayer list. I leave my spin out of it.

In Paul's letter to the Romans that Ben read from today, Paul talks to us about that universal experience we are having right now — suffering. His answer isn't to sing a version of *Don't Worry Be Happy* like some Christians do. Like those who said to me after Bryan died, "You should be happy not sad. Aren't you glad Bryan is in heaven now?" Paul also doesn't preach a message from the Prosperity Gospel. He doesn't say that God wants us all to be rich and that we can attain that by faith, positive thinking

and a nice donation to Paul's mission work. Paul also didn't say, "Pray for the Second Coming so that you can be whisked away from this world and into the great by and by."

As I have told you before I am coming to appreciate Paul more and more. Paul acknowledges suffering and, in fact, states that all of creation is groaning in solidarity with us. He also says we have a companion who walks with us in our suffering....the very Spirit of God. The Spirit is present here and now, Paul says, and get this....the Spirit invites us to join even deeper with the suffering of the world. That is one of the experiences I am having right now that makes me want to turn off my news feed and hide my head in the sand. I'm truly hearing the suffering of the world.

Paul compares the suffering we go through to labor pains, which I think makes the Spirit of God a midwife. There she is....smack dab in the messy middle with us — helping us to find a focus, breathe through the pain, reminding us that we've got this and we are birthing something beautiful. A midwife dishes out hope while everything around us makes us it look like we won't be able to do it. Paul ties suffering to hope through the metaphor of labor. "We hope for what we do not see and we wait for it with patience." Patience? Maybe....probably not.

But what choice do we have in the midst of a pandemic but to wait with patience. I'm trying. How are you doing on that? Feeling patient? Or are you finding yourself tongue-tied for fear of being tone deaf in the midst of your own suffering...eager for everything to return to normal? I feel you.

Paul promises that in our weakness the Spirit of God, the midwife of hope, intercedes for us. It is interesting that in this letter to the church in Rome he calls these Christians weak. Paul was writing to people who lived in an honor/shame culture. This would have been an insult. But Paul was acknowledging that which we try to hide...our weakness. Paul was opening up the space for hope in the midst of suffering and help in the midst of frailty. The help, he says, comes from the Spirit of God who intercedes for us. Actually Paul made up a word here by mashing together other words. We do it all the time — labradoodle, chillax, hangry. Paul puts together three words that mean: 1. To experience, 2. With and 3. For the sake of someone else. We translate it "to intercede".

This midwife of hope experiences our distress with us for our sake...even stepping right into the middle of our prayer life, especially when prayer quits us. The Spirit of God interposes herself when we can no longer form the words. I love the way Paul puts it, "...the very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

I read this week that psychological studies on sighing show that we don't usually sigh when we feel whole, satisfied, at ease. We sigh most often when we feel discontent, frustration, resignation. The Spirit of God steps in when language won't even form and speaks our pain with sighs too deep for words. You know those times....another school shooting, another unarmed black person shot, Covid numbers on the rise, trying to figure out how to work while you help educate your children, having a loved one in a

skilled nursing center or in the hospital and you can't visit them....times when all that is left are sighs too deep for words.

After Bryan died I started getting counseling to help me on my journey with grief. I would go in to each session tense, the weight of my grief like a boulder on my back, feeling unable to fully formulate language to express my pain. For an hour my counselor would join me in the messiness, help me to find focus, encourage the breath to return to my lungs and remind me that there was something being birthed in me through this suffering. She was the midwife for my grief. At the end of my appointment I realized that I always took a deep breath....a sigh.

There isn't just an emotional side to sighing. There is also a physiological piece to it. When we spend a prolonged time breathing shallow or fast, our lungs stiffen. A sigh extends the lungs air sacs and gives us a sense of relief. Sighing while suffering brings us solace. The Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. Sighs that are wordless groans that bring us comfort. Try it.

Friends, you may be muscling through this time with resilience or you may be finding it very difficult to take a deep breath or perhaps you are doing both. But I am guessing that no matter how you are walking through this time there have been griefs, losses and new painful awarenesses that you have had to navigate. If Paul's metaphor of labor is helpful, I offer it to you. There may be something that is being born in you.

But more importantly I want to remind you that if you can't see what is being born...if prayer has quit you...if it isn't time for words...you are not on this journey alone. You have a spiritual midwife as close as the wind or your words or sighs. She simply refuses to leave your side. She is mopping your brow; reminding you that you can do this; encouraging you to breathe; helping you focus on a future filled with newness — and even if you can't feel her she is groaning for you when you no longer have the strength to do it for yourself. You are not alone. You are not alone. You are never alone. Amen.