



## **"Big Sigh"**

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring  
Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California***

***Sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
July 24, 2011  
Romans 8:26-29 & 31-39 (NRSV)***

Have you ever found yourself speechless?

While you're pondering your own experience, I'll share a few examples that came to my mind when I pondered speechlessness.

This past Thursday, I received an email message from Billie and Cliff Sherwood, with the news that the Sherwood's second grandson had entered the world. Billie wrote:

Dearest Family & Friends:

Sarah & Austin's baby boy arrived today at 4:32 p.m. This precious little bundle of joy is 22" long and [weighs] 8lbs 7oz. Mom & baby are doing well. Dad is questionable—bemused, dazzled, and ecstatic. Name to be determined.

We will visit in the morning after they have some time to get used to each other.

Love,  
Billie & Cliff

Becoming a father, as Billie and Cliff explain, leaves some men speechless.

Another example of speechlessness that comes to mind was shared by a friend, several years ago, who managed an academic department at my graduate school in Boston. My friend's name is Deborah.

I remember how Deborah described the occasion when a former colleague of hers (who had been a professor of mine) approached her desk one evening, sat down on the chair opposite of her desk, and proposed marriage to her.

Deborah's initial response was one of total shock. She was speechless.

While the two had been friends for many years, there had been no previous courtship, and not even the inkling of an acknowledgement that either was attracted to the other.

The two had only exchanged pleasantries, passed papers, and coordinated academic schedules in the past.

In Deborah's mind, she was decidedly single and though only middle aged, she imagined remaining single the rest of her life. Jerry, meanwhile, was a widower and a professor who was teetering on the cusp of retirement. He and his late wife had raised several children and had been enjoying grandparenthood and were looking forward to a leisurely retirement and European travel. That was until she suffered a brief illness that brought an abrupt end to her life.

On the surface, Deborah and Jerry's lives couldn't have seemed more different from each other in terms of life trajectories. Then came the marriage proposal.

After what I was told was a long and uncomfortable silence for both of them, Deborah broke the ice by saying to Jerry, "Well, if we are going to consider marriage, perhaps we should start the conversation with a cup of coffee. My treat."

The rest is history, as they say. Within two or three months, the couple was married, and as far as I can tell from Facebook, they seem to be living happily ever after.

## II

It's a blessing when one can point to happy occasions that leave us speechless, but the truth be told, I suspect that more often than not the occasions that have left most of us speechless have been sad or threatening circumstances.

Friday morning, America awoke to the dreadful news from Oslo, Norway that a sociopath, who disagrees with his nation's political direction, planted a bomb in a government building that killed seven people, and then he snuck onto an island retreat center and massacred nearly ninety young people who were enrolled in a summer camp program run by the Labor Party.

One news reporter compared the devastation in Norway this past week to our nation's experience when Timothy McVeigh blew up the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, on April 20, 1995.

Words do not come easily. We find ourselves speechless in times like these.

Earlier this past week, I learned that a woman in our neighborhood—who is a young mother—was diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

Cancer is a ubiquitous disease as we know. Many of us have had a brush or two with it ourselves, and many more will encounter cancer as we age, because cancer is more common in prosperous nations like ours, where most people are never stricken or they survive infectious diseases commonly experienced in third world countries.

Despite the ubiquity of a cancer diagnoses in our time and place, nothing much equips us for receiving the news that a young person, particularly a young mother whose children are dependent upon her, is diagnosed with a form of cancer that is barely treatable and is often deemed terminal. To compound matters in this situation, the young mother in our neighborhood is poor. She is an immigrant. She doesn't speak much English, and her access to affordable healthcare is very limited.

What to say? We are speechless.

On Monday, July 11, while Stephanie and I were on vacation in Mexico, we received the news that a *derecho* had blown through the Upper Midwest. According to the National Weather Service, these straight-line winds that define a *derecho* reached speeds of between 100 and 125 miles an hour—a force equal to an F1 tornado. The storm started near Des Moines, Iowa and traveled 550 miles across Central Iowa, Northern Illinois, and Southwest Michigan, finally losing momentum in the Grand Rapids area.

The farms that my aunts and uncles own, including the farm where my grandparents lived and raised their family, were largely destroyed by the storms.

The houses are still standing, but one will need to be torn down and the other two require substantial repairs. All of the other farm buildings, including the barns, hog houses, chicken houses, machine sheds, garages, grain bins, and silos incurred major damage or were destroyed.

The crops are lying on the ground. Building materials and other debris are scattered across thousands of acres of land and have created a nightmare for farmers who rely on their ability to drive large machinery through their fields to plant, tend, and harvest crops.

The loss of livestock is still being tallied. Some animals were killed in the storm, and many more that survived the storm were stressed by the experience and won't survive because of the injuries they endured in collapsing buildings and from flying debris, or as a result of their owners' inability to get food and water to them.

President Obama declared the area where my aunts' and uncles' live a disaster area. FEMA has arrived and is offering low interest loans to storm survivors, but this type of aid is most helpful for local governments and the young, who have the time and strength to start over. Many farmers affected by this storm are like my mother's oldest brother and his wife. They are past retirement age, and are still trying to recover from earlier losses. They are too old to begin anew, and they can't afford to take on more debt.

The insurance adjusters arrived last week and started their assessment work, which they hope to complete before winter. Insurance checks will offer some relief to those who were insured, but no one ever has enough insurance to cover catastrophic losses like these.

What can a preacher say to her own family? Even preachers can be speechless.

### III

Today's epistle reading is Paul's encouraging response to the Romans, and ultimately to Christians in every time and place, who have been left speechless by hardship or peril. Here Paul writes:

...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...

Paul says a mouthful in these three verses. He says that the Spirit helps us in our weakness—meaning that we don't have to know what to say. We don't have to have the right words. The Spirit can and will communicate for us. How? According to Paul, "With sighs too deep for words."

Contemplate Paul's phrase for a moment: The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs...

Think about the hardships that you have known—your own or others. Remember some of the times when you have been left speechless, particularly in a negative situation.

Perhaps when you've encountered the sadness of others, you've felt a need to say something meaningful—something that would alleviate another person's suffering—but the right words never seemed to form on your lips.

Now consider situations when others may have wished to say something meaningful or helpful to you, when you were struggling. Did their words bring you comfort? Or, when words failed, was it their presence and unspoken support that helped you through that rough patch?

I suspect that by reflecting on our own situations we better understand that what is most often needed in hardship is a presence—not a word. We most need someone with whom we can sigh, or who sighs, or groans, or who even cries with us. Even if that presence is just expressed through a card or a phone call to say, "I'm thinking of you," a vase of flowers sitting on a table reminding us of a friend's concern, or a fruit basket or a casserole that nourishes us when we are feeling too overwhelmed to cook.

It's in these subtle ways that the Spirit is present in our lives, and that we can and are present and attentive to one another. In these ways, the experience of the one who is

suffering is noticed, it is received, and the sufferer's burden is lightened—sometimes without any words at all.

The Spirit can be—and in fact is—present for us in empathetic ways. Whether or not we are aware of this presence depends largely on whether we put ourselves in a posture of prayer and open ourselves to that presence ourselves.

Similarly, we can emulate and embody the work of the Spirit for others by being present on a personal level with those who are near and dear to us, simply by showing up, making a call, or dropping a note.

Also, we can be present for each other as a community. I recall numerous times, for example, when someone in this very room has shared a great joy or a deep sadness during our service of prayer and the whole congregation has expressed a subtle but profound gesture of celebration, or offered an audible sigh or groan in response to sad news. Those have been powerful and awe-inspiring moments in our worship. Those have been occasions when I (and perhaps you) have been more fully aware that we were on holy ground.

So we have some experience of what Paul was writing about to the Romans when he said:

...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.

Paul goes on in chapter eight to offer many more profound words that are often quoted in times of trouble. These words are lovely. They are powerful. They are moving. But as most of us know, sometimes we need silence more than words, a presence more than a promise, and a sigh or a cry, more than we need words or deeds, because these inaudible expressions and moments can have a healing effect, especially when there is no “fixing” or “curing” a situation. This is the truth of our lives. This is the gospel truth. Thanks be to God. Amen.