

**Katy Fazio - Romans 8:18-30**  
**“The Language of Hope”**

**May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts find their way to the heart of God this morning. Amen.**

This is a special day for me. Today is my wedding anniversary. Six years ago, like any young Christian couple, in the months leading up to our wedding Walt and I had one thing on our minds. Liturgy! Actually the first liturgy I ever wrote I wrote with Walt.

We spent hours poring over the language for the welcome, for the community blessings, and the service of communion at our wedding. We wrote our vows together, we chose our scripture together, which was not the passage that [Reader] just read, but another one from Romans.

I am blessed with a partner who obsesses about word choice as much as I do. Whenever something was addressed to the guests, we used expansive welcoming language for the Divine. We had guests of many faith backgrounds and especially at the communion table we wanted to be sure that all would feel welcome to participate. But when the ceremony and ritual was directed at Walt and me, we wanted the expression of our faith to be more traditionally Christian, to make a covenant with each other in the presence of God.

All of this to say is that we put a lot of stock in words, their power and purpose. But of course there are times when words fail us. In his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul writes “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

It’s sort of stunning that Paul of all people had ever experienced a loss for words, considering what a prolific writer and evangelist he was. Actually I would guess many of us can probably think of a few of Paul’s words he could have chosen to keep as ‘inside thoughts.’

Scholars aren't in agreement about why Paul wrote this letter to the Romans. Unlike the other churches Paul wrote to, Paul didn’t plant the Roman Church which makes it sort of a unique situation that asks the question, why would Paul write the longest and most holistic account of his theology to a church that he had not started and had not yet even visited?

Some Scholars believe that it was intended as sort of a last Testament, a ‘just in case’ letter. Because Paul was on his way to Jerusalem where he thought he might be killed.

In the book of Acts we learn that All of Paul's friends begged him stay away from Jerusalem. But Paul would not be persuaded. According to Acts, he said “I go *bound in the spirit* unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there.” Paul was a Jew. So much of his ministry, including the letter of Romans, is devoted to instructing Jews and Gentiles on how to be the Christian church together.

Once strangers but now united in Christ, these people needed to figure out how to live together, how to pray together, how to hold this new community together, a community with diverse backgrounds and traditions and beliefs about the law and what was required of each other and who exactly was going to inherit the earth. Paul is *committed* to making sure that Jews and Gentiles alike know that Jesus came. for. *everybody*.

And that was making him enemies on all sides in all places, but especially in Jerusalem. You can imagine his heart aching to go back to the holy city, to the Temple that was the center of Paul’s religious practice and the very home of God.

But Jerusalem is still under Roman occupation as it was in Jesus’s life, and tensions were high. And it was still a dangerous place to be talking about the coming of a new world, the way Paul did.

And so, unsure of how much longer he had to live, Paul wrote a letter to the Romans and the section that we read today is often titled in your bibles something like “current struggle, future glory”. Paul says, ‘Everything that we've been going through is nothing compared to the glory that's coming. the whole of creation has been groaning in labor pains until now and not only creation but we ourselves groan inwardly while we wait’

The whole of creation has been groaning. But 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 says that God hears our prayers *even when our prayers are wordless, when we are in the agony of a new world being born, when the end is not in sight, and we are speechless,* That is when the Holy Spirit intercedes.

For we do not know how to pray as we ought.

A little while after Larkin was born I found myself driving from my house in Natick to Gloucester, about an hour and a half drive, because I had found a really good deal on a stroller on Facebook Marketplace. If you know you know.

It was the first time that I had been alone for any amount of time, the first silence I'd experienced in months. I have a habit of talking to God on car rides because it's the only time that I feel like truly nobody else is going to overhear me. And so I prayed out loud, and it had been a while. I got through all of my usual catching up with God.

But I knew there was something that I was avoiding. And I said, "God, I feel stupid even saying it because I don't know what it's going to do." And I stopped and broke into sobs, because I didn't have the words.

Since October 7th I have struggled to find the words to talk about Palestine. Partly I think because every word is so charged that it feels like even speaking about it is an act of violence against somebody or the other. Palestine, Israel, Gaza, Zionist, Anti-Zionist, Terrorism, War, Conflict, Occupation, Defense, Ceasefire, Arms Embargo, Genocide, Apartheid. Nakba, Hostages, Prisoners, Homeland, Holy Land, Promised Land, Our Land.

I could go on. *Every* word around Palestine and Israel has at least 100 years of history loaded into it, history that our education system does not do any kind of decent job teaching, a failure that has left us bereft of the language that we need to do the work of peacemaking that Christians are called to do.

“We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Holy Spirit intercedes.” The language of the holy spirit is the language of the heart. The language of lament and of hope in hopeless situations. We might wonder how Paul can look at the brutality of the ancient world; the persecution, the occupation, the hosts of martyrs, and still say that these things are the birthing pains of a new and glorious world? How can we bear witness the horrific violence going on in Gaza, and still speak the language of the holy spirit?

One Sunday this past Fall, Walt was driving Derry home from a playground while I was at church, and he saw a group of protesters at the Natick Common with "I stand with Israel" signs. There were about a dozen people. There was one woman standing apart from them with a sign that said "Ceasefire Now." Walt pulled over, gave her his number, and went home.

And so it came to pass that Walt and his new friend have organized a stand out for peace on the Natick Common, separately from the Pro-Israel demonstrations, every Saturday for almost five months now. They've shown up every week for five months, their numbers growing organically with people from a diversity of traditions and backgrounds; Christian, Jewish, and Muslim people, as well as others. Week after

week, the group is met with a variety of reactions from bystanders. Some hostility, some surprise, but mostly gratitude.

- “I was just there,” one person said. “I’m a doctor.”
- “Are you guys Muslim?” another person asked, carrying his son with him. “I can come back next week”
- “Do you live here? I thought I was the only one who cared about this.”
- “You guys are brave for doing this in a small town.”
  
- “Thank you for being out here.”
- “Thank you.”
- “Thank you.”
- “Thank you.”

Beloved, it’s not naive to hope in the midst of catastrophe, hope is a necessity. It’s not naive to reject the idea that escalating violence can ever make anybody safe, or to say that peace is possible, even peace beyond our understanding. Hope doesn’t happen by accident, Hope is a discipline, like prayer, that sustains us and makes life possible. As Christians, it’s our duty to speak the language of hope for those who need to hear it. And we all need to hear it.

That is why we *have* the holy spirit: the helper, the comforter, the advocate. The spirit of gentleness, the spirit of restlessness. Hope is the language of the Holy Spirit, who searches the heart and speaks in sighs, in groans too deep for words. Hope is why we can say, together, that God is good. All the time.

It's the Holy Spirit that binds Paul to go to Jerusalem, where he enters the Temple to pray and is arrested, and survives.

Paul follows this passage by writing "I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love."

God's love speaks to us in every generation. Calls to us like wind blowing over the sea. May the church hear what the spirit is saying. Amen.