

**"The Spirit Groans"**  
**The Sunday Sermon**  
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It is indeed an unexpected and bewildering privilege to be invited to preach in this city with its tradition of learning and distinction and, particularly as a Methodist, the place about which we learned as children in Sunday school—when we used to hear and even dramatize the story of Wesley and the birth of Methodism.

Together with my own gratitude for this opportunity I want to express the joy of our Institute for the privilege of sharing in the worship of this congregation of Wesley Memorial Methodist Church of Oxford and our deep appreciation for the hospitality which this church has offered us. We have indeed felt at home in this house. May I therefore convey to the congregation our gratitude as well as our love and blessing in Jesus Christ.

*Romans 8:18-27*

Whether out of courage or out of fear, I have chosen to comment on this section of the Epistle to the Romans which is supposed to be at the very heart of our Methodist understanding of the gospel.

It is rightly so, I think, because here the Apostle Paul makes it abundantly clear that faith is not merely an objective transaction, nor an intellectual conviction, nor, one should add, a set of resolutions, but a total involvement of God and the individual in a personal relationship. The name and reality of this total involvement is "the Holy Spirit." Or, to use Paul's and Wesley's expression, this one and twofold "witness" of God's Spirit is *in, with, to* our own spirit.

This, and this alone, is what allows us to address the Almighty by the name which Jesus used, and which otherwise would be blasphemy on our lips, *abba*, "my

father." This, and this alone, is what entitles us to claim what otherwise would be sacrilege, a participation in the inheritance of Christ's Resurrection and glory. (Romans 8:15-17)

Here we are, therefore, at the very center of our personal, warm, intimate, living fellowship with God, in the sphere of the Spirit. And suddenly the Apostle turns on the lights, opens the curtains and we find ourselves, bewildered and gasping, surrounded, pressed, and questioned by all the forces and elements of creation. (verse 19) Our conversation with God does not take place in some shadowy corner of a temple where we can whisper outside the reach of other ears or in the recesses of the heart. It is a public affair, out in the open, where all creatures stand on tiptoe to see and hear what is happening. On this dialogue hangs their own future, their hope for liberation and fulfillment.

1. Exegetes are not agreed on the meaning of this "expectant groaning" of creation. It is not too difficult to discern the "groaning" of human creation expressed as slavery or meaninglessness. "For I have heard the *groaning* of my people, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage, and I have remembered my covenant." (Exodus 6:5) "For the oppression of the poor, for the *groaning* of the oppressed, now will I arise, saith the Lord." (Psalm 12:5) Although the word is not the same, can we not also hear: "The voice of thy brother's blood *crieth* unto me from the grund." (Genesis 4:10) "The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields . . . cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts." (James 5:4) Passages could be multiplied. The creation cries and groans on the lips of persons oppressed, tortured, exploited, cheated, and enslaved by others. Moreover, throughout Job and the Psalms is heard the groaning of human beings perplexed by the victory of evil and the silence of the Lord. Creation groans from the heart

the individual who does not find meaning in a life which turns in a vacuum, without goal or direction. *man creation* groans in the captivity created by human injustice, ambition, pride, and violence.

The *creation* of which Paul speaks may, nevertheless, have a greater scope; it includes things, energies, the whole realm of nature. Perhaps today we are beginning to hear at least something of this groaning of nature. We hear the groaning of the waters drained of life by pollution, the forests turned into deserts through irrational and profit-crazy exploitation, and the built-in obsolescence of the very stuff of our earth as it goes through the grind of our industrial and consumer society. The raped nature of Southeast Asia, the millions of tons of steel, the nuclear energy we have harnessed to our will to destroy and dominate—*they groan*. The nature which God subjected to us so that it might lead it to its goal is caught in our captivity of vanity and sin.

Paul continues: "... and *eagerly expects*"—its hope of deliverance—"the manifestation of the children of God." *We—those whom the Spirit has taught to say, "Abba"*—we are the meaning of creation, the answer to the groaning of earth and humanity, the hope of the world!

It sounds preposterous! But there is here no hint of triumphalism. We are shown here as we are. We are trembling, groaning, perplexed, not knowing even what to ask or how to pray. But something has happened to us! Poor and perplexed as we are, we have received *the Spirit*. We have heard the word of promise and hope—and *know it to be true*. This is all we have, and it is enough!

What is Paul talking about? He is talking about those who are *being sanctified* in the Spirit—about those who have heard the gospel, believe and begin to move freely and passionately among things in the world because they

know they are in their Father's house and do not need to steal or hoard. He speaks about those who have heard the gospel, believe and begin to give up all need to preserve their image, status, and self-respect because their dignity has been once for all ensured as children of God. He speaks of those who have heard the gospel, believe and begin to discern the meaning of life, not in their private satisfaction, fulfillment, or even holiness but in the fellowship and solidarity of love.

We are still in the beginning stages of our pilgrimage. We still live as captives of our fears, our isolation, our greed, our privacy, but the veil is torn. *We know* what truth is and what a lie is. The universe knows this is its meaning; its groans and strains itself to realize it! A dry and sterile earth groans expecting the love of a human community to make it fruitful. The dispossessed of the earth groan for the freedom to live fully as human beings and not as slaves. The youth and women of our time groan for the acceptance of love, but they find dehumanized institutions intent on making of them producing and consuming machines. Creation itself groans that its meaning may be finally realized! We Christians groan because we have tasted the reality, but are unable to live by it, to realize it. (verse 24)

3. This is indeed the ultimate truth of our life in the Spirit. Even though we groan in powerlessness, *we cannot abandon hope*. We have tasted the future, and we cannot renounce it. The person who has really received the Spirit is a *rara avis*, a strange creature, who has been convinced—against all evidence—that freedom, love, and community are the truth of creation. That individual will not cease groaning, struggling, seeking, hoping. That person will not cease straining toward the future, betting on God's tomorrow, ready to give up the security of today, even when unable to see clearly how the future will be—for hope that is seen is not hope. Why should one hope for what one sees?

Are we indeed *people of the Spirit*? Wesley's call for conversion is just as urgent as it was two hundred years ago. Are we really people of the Spirit, or deep down are we really of the flesh? Do we wake up each morning to the hope of the new, or do we simply expect the safety of the old, irritated when something disturbs us? Do we expect creation to move to its goal or simply to offer us a safe place for our own introverted and private satisfaction? Do we expect the Spirit to lead us to struggle for the newness of creation or simply to sanctify and preserve our "life in the flesh"?

4. *We cannot really answer these questions.* (verse 27) And here, finally, Paul opens a still larger scene—the curtains of heaven itself—to show us the ultimate dimension of faith. There, *God himself is groaning* because he is involved in the drama of hope. When we become restless and unable to accommodate our lives to demands of so-called "reality;" when we rebel against the meaninglessness of human suffering and deprivation, of waste and destruction; when we try, however hesitantly, to create a bit of freedom, love, fellowship, joy—it is the Spirit which groans in us.

And when we sleep, comfortably established within meaninglessness as if we know nothing, the Spirit groans with a betrayed creation and struggles to awaken us back to our true reality as God's children! It is only at this point that Paul can take us back to our dialogue with God. He can now tell us what *prayer* is. Prayer is the unity of the groaning of creation, the sigh of a restless faith, the expectation which strains toward the future, the praise for the victory which is certain. Prayer is our "yes" to our neighbor taking God as witness. Prayer is taking our place within the struggle of the creature for its liberation. Prayer is echoing the Spirit's own travail for the coming of God's kingdom. This is the dialogue of faith.