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“Sighs and Groans and Prayers”

A sermon by Cheryl Barton Henry

Pentecost Sunday (Year B)

May 24, 2015

John 15: 26–27, 16:4b–15; Acts 2:1–21; Romans 8:19–27

Most of you know Susie Ewald.
Among Susie’s funnier stories
is the one she told me when I was pregnant with Sam.

It is the story of her child birthing classes
when she was pregnant with her daughter, Caroline.
According to Susie,
her instructor was a very dear Asian woman
who spoke English well enough,
but in a way typical of some non-native language speakers
of every kind.
She had a tendency to speak
in direct and straight forward sentences
using every means of communication available to her
that sometimes went straight to her point
in ways that were probably more poignant than even she realized.

On one particular day, Susie says her teacher
was describing the birthing process.
It went something like this:
“When you go in labor, you are happy!”
Susie says her teacher smiled broadly
and drew on the dry erase board before the class
a large smiling face.
Everyone in the class smiled with their teacher.
They all were happy to be having a baby.

The instructor then suddenly became very serious faced.
“BUT! At some point” —
here, she erased the smiley mouth

and drew a decidedly frowny one instead—
“you are not happy anymore!”

Susie says
she will never forget
how true those words were
as she experienced the birth of both her children.
“When you go into labor, you are happy!
But at some point, (*some point!*) you are NOT happy anymore!”

What’s true of birthing babies
is also true of birthing the children of God.

And odd as it may seem
even a sworn to singledom, childless male like Paul,
whose experience with childbirthing had to have been limited,
had some grasp of this wisdom.

You can hear it in our scripture lesson for this morning,
can you not?
In verse 19, Paul says, “For the creation waits with eager longing
for the revealing of the children of God.”

It is as if Paul is saying, “When you go into labor, you are happy!”

Happy because, as Paul reminds us,
being birthed as the children of God means
that all creation will be set free from its bondage to decay,
and we will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God!

That’s certainly something to be happy about, is it not?
The birthing begins and we anticipate
its glorious end: an end guaranteed by God,
an end that is not just for us, but for the whole world.
Redemption is in sight!
The world as God intended it is coming.
We are happy!!

But at some point,
at some point
for Paul, it’s around verse 22.
The labor pains grow serious!
The hope of God’s good purposes feels threatened,
the inward groaning is real.
The hope grows dim.
At some point,
we will not be happy anymore!
No matter how glorious the long hoped for end may be.

At some point,
the sighs may even be too deep for words Paul says.

This happens for all of us in ways small and large,
sooner or later.

The month of May

for those of you with school-aged children
can drive you close to that point!

I don't know about you, but I usually look at May and think,
"Oh hurrah!"

End-of-year celebrations and summer is on its way!

May is a birthing sort of month for many of us with school-aged kids.

Going in,

everything is happy and sounds fun!

BUT at some point, at *some* point,

maybe it's that point when you realize

that the schedule of just one of child—let's say SAM Henry! (I'm only speaking from personal
experience now.

YOU will have to name YOUR own point!)—

may include a birthday, a piano recital, a piano competition,
a sports award banquet, auditions for summer scholarships
and a summer play, a mandatory physical for Fall cross country,
and 4 days of EOG's...

and that's just the schedule of one 14-year-old boy
in a world of 7 billion people!

Imagine Christyn and Jay who deal with four such schedules!

At some point, birthing joy or not,

do you ever feel you've had enough joy?!

At some point, even amidst many blessings,

even the happy
cannot feel happy!

But hard as that is, we all know that

it's not nearly as hard as hard can get.

Because most of us,

if we have half a wit about us,

once we lift our heads out of the fog of our own busyness,
realize there are others who are in labor difficulties, too.

The neighbor down the street,

whose overgrown lawn you've noticed

but haven't thought very deeply about,
actually had a cancer scare a few months ago.

He's so young and healthy looking,

you didn't believe it was possible,

but there it is.

The hurriedly sent email tells how
he and his wife and their two young kids
have been so caught up in all the medical appointments
they haven't had a chance to tell the neighbors.
We the neighbors feel terrible about
how unaware we have been even what's going on
in a home we see every day.

And that just the beginning of it, really.

The earth quakes and then quakes again in Nepal.
A college kid kills himself.
Tornadoes in the Midwest relocates a friend's wedding into
the church basement rather than the sanctuary.
The drought in California and the floods in Louisiana
leave us bewildered with what to address first.
A friend's sister's husband dies
and the next day finds out that her mother
is headed into hospice care.
The polar cap is melting too fast.
Lines at Urban Ministries are long these days,
and volunteers to serve them are hard to find.
Meanwhile the Doughman run here in Durham,
where one runs a specified number of miles
and then downs baked goods in good quantity,
leaving participants with bellyaches and our streets with vomit,
is growing in popularity.

Rev. Sara Hayden says
we live in a world that is both "hungry and overfed"¹
and both representing such a need
for the saving love and healing of Jesus Christ
we can barely grasp it.

At some point,
"not happy" is not even the word for it, is it?
Maybe the word to describe our state
is "deep sadness"
or even "helplessness"
as we listen and come to understand
how truly complicated and hard laboring is this world we live in.

And church isn't a worry-free zone, either.
For even here we find that, like everywhere else,

¹ Journal for Preachers, Vol XXVIII, No. 4 Pentecost 2015, page 40.

there is sorrow—individual sorrows to be sure,
but corporate sorrows, too.
Struggles about music and theology, which one is best.
Controversies over who can be ordained or not—
who will be our pastor or not and when?!
Who can get married or not, who is saved or not
who was forgotten or not—
all these rise up in our hearts,
and the feelings are overwhelming.

And at some point,
maybe at THAT point, if not before,
words fail us.
And we just want to groan!

Groan. And sigh!
And pray? Well, what should we pray?

I'm not sure if it was May
when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans,
but one thing is for sure, Paul heard that groaning and sighing.
Maybe he even felt that loss of prayer.

He heard it in the Christians at Rome,
he heard it in himself,
and perhaps
in some mysterious communion of the saints of God,
he must have heard it in us all these generations from him.

But that's not all he heard.
With the help of the Spirit, he perceived
that there was something else in the room
with us as we groaned and sighed and tried to pray.

That something else
was actually more of a someone else.
That someone else was the Holy Spirit.
The advocate or helper as Jesus names him in John's gospel.
Or as Paul sees him, our labor coach.

Paul tells us that our labor coach, the Holy Wind or Spirit,
is telling him on our behalf
that at the point when we are "not happy" any longer,
there are at least four things we as people of faith
can hold in our minds and hearts and spirits
to ground us and help us endure.

The first is that
when it feels as if we are falling apart,

when the chaos is overwhelming
and sounding as discordant on our ears
as the notes in the song the choir will sing as their anthem for today,
that amidst the chaos,
there is a tune to be found.
Music is happening, even if it doesn't sound like music as we know it.
Something is getting born,
even if it doesn't look like birth as we know it!

That groaning we hear?
Well, even when dying is involved,
these groans we hear are not ultimately death pangs!
Rather, if we dare to hear it,
they are birthing pangs which are part and parcel of new life emerging.

Secondly, Paul tells us
that though we are not fully born yet, we are not in this alone.

When I gave birth to Sam,
sweet Joyce Houk, a retired Duke OB nurse
who helped birth a number of our kids here at First Presbyterian,
offered to accompany Andy and me at his birth.
She was wonderful!
Her skill and know-how
didn't take the pain or the peril of birth away,
but her presence definitely lessened our suffering
and increased the odds of a safely delivered Sam
(who arrived with an umbilical cord around his neck, by the way)!

Through it all, she advocated for us!
She calmly and cheerfully greeted the doctors and staff
with whom she was so familiar.
Though I barely knew Joyce the night before Sam was born,
she was such an asset to our "birthing team."

I'm embarrassed to remember how skeptical
I was when she first approached me to offer her help.

I guess I thought I didn't need her.
After all, I had birthed Abi just fine without someone like her.
Knowing what I know now,
I seriously can't imagine
what it would have been like without her there that night!
I am amazed at how often
the Spirit reaches out to provide for us
persons of love and help we didn't even know to ask for.

We are not alone.
Even a committed single childless Apostle Paul
knew this.
Maybe that's why
we never hear of him traveling on his missions alone.

Thirdly, Paul tells us in verse 25
that in the process of birthing, patience is required.
The Greek word here might better be interpreted
as "endurance."²

I have a T-shirt I got in Asheville
that has these words beneath a picture of a great oak tree:
"No great thing happens suddenly."
Birthing the glorious children of God and the new creation
is a super great thing!
It isn't going to happen suddenly.
It's going to take some time.
Much longer than the 9 months it takes to birth human babies!

It's going to take patience and endurance
on all our parts to make it to the end.
In our effort to birth what God wants birthed in us,
endurance is a good not to be undervalued.
Jesus tells us in Luke 21:19
that by our endurance we will gain our souls.

Fourthly and finally, Paul tells us that it will take more than us
to get the birthing done.
In the end, it will be the Spirit's grace-filled work among us
that will make the most difference.
The Spirit who knows our frailties,
the Spirit who,
as Eugene Peterson translates verses 26 and 27,
will [pray] in and for us,
making prayer out of our wordless sighs,
our aching groans.
[For] He knows us far better than we know ourselves,
knows our pregnant condition,
and keeps us present before God.³

What a gift, friend!
What a comfort. What an advocate. What a help.
What a wind of reassurance and hope and renewal that is.

² Working Preacher website for Yr B Pentecost, 2012 Audrey West on the Acts lection.

³ Eugene Peterson's translation from "The Message" Romans 8:26–27

Today is Pentecost,
that day when we celebrate the church's first day of active labor.
There were groans then too:
people who thought they were drunk or just crazy;
people who had longed for decades
and across national boundaries—
Parthians, Medes, Elamites,
people from Egypt and parts of Libya—
who all yearned to hear God's promises
in a tongue they could hear, and they did!

That day, active labor began. Everyone was happy.
Folks new to the faith
and new to the labor especially so.
But sisters and brothers,
many of us are at *that next* point,
that "not happy" point of groaning and sighs
and prayers we don't know the words for:
the hard labor of birth.
But there is good news for us, too, this day.
Whether we can or cannot believe it,
it is the same nonetheless.
These groans and sighs and heavy prayers
are not a death rattle.
They are birth pains!
We are not alone
unless we choose to pretend we are.
The Spirit is with us!
And with the Spirit's help,
the love and care of one another
is there also.

Birthing is painful and perilous,
but the Spirit is our labor coach
who nurtures our ability to endure in order to gain our souls.
Here today at this table of Holy Communion,
it is she who bids us to come eat with our Savior
whose saving grace
will not abandon us in our time of greatest need,
and who will never give up on us
becoming the glorious children of God.

My daughter told me some years back
a story about Katharine Whitmore
that Kriddie, Katharine's daughter, told her.
According to Kriddie, whenever her mom sees a car driving crazy,
she tries never to get upset or angry,

but only says,
“I wonder if someone is pregnant and giving birth?”

Can't you hear Paul with all the company of heaven
saying, “YES!”

Amen!