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(Sigh) I just don't know what to say. *(Sigh)* Maybe that's ok, at least in our prayers, according to Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Have you ever had a hard time finding the right words—or any words—for prayer, when you're overwhelmed with emotions too deep for words?

When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he called these kinds of prayers *wordless sighs*, when life overwhelms us and words get stuck in our innermost souls, when our tongues become unable to utter our fears and worries.

The Message Bible translates Paul's words as: "The moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. [The Spirit] does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs" (8:26-27).

One pastor tells about a family who had wordless sighs when their baby was born at 23 weeks' gestation, who only lived a few months in the hospital before she died. During those months, the pastor and several others visited her hospital

incubator, reading her stories, and singing her songs. The pastor said,

"I will never forget her mom telling me she was too angry and too grieved to pray. She'd sit in church empty and unable to participate in the celebratory nature of many of Sunday's services. I told her, in these moments when life becomes too painful to pray, that is when she can let the community of faith pray for her. To me, this is the ultimate gift of a 'Spirit [that] intercedes with sighs too deep for words.' It is the gift of a community that holds us up when we are not strong enough to stand on our own. And we can be uplifted knowing that nothing, not even debilitating grief, can separate us from the love of God."

Did you ever think of yourself as part of a community that prays through the Spirit for those who cannot find the words for prayer? Sometimes we may feel as though we have to fill the air with words in order to pray, but silence is just as effective a means of prayer. To sit and be quiet is not an easy thing to do, is it? We think of things we need to get done later in the day, creating a mental to-do list. In times of silence, I sometimes wonder

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how long I've been silent, and then I feel the need to look at the clock. Restlessness may enter into your silence, and you may begin to wonder if you should be doing something else instead of just sitting there.

Mennonite pastor Christiana Peterson writes in her book *Mystics and Misfits* about a time she found a statue of St. Francis while cleaning out her grandmother's house. Christiana took that wooden statue of the saint home and placed in her yard to serve as a reminder of the mystical nature of prayer. One day, while in contemplation, she wrote a letter to St. Francis that she placed in a tree near the statue, expressing her struggles and longings.

I'm not sure why I speak to you of this longing, Francis. Maybe it's because I've been suffering recently from these swirling, anxious thoughts. So, in desperation, I began practicing centering prayer, and that led me to mystics like you.

How did you know what to do, Francis? Was it when you heard the voice of God the first time that you decided it was time to let go of the things that bound you?...Can you show me how

to be a mystic? Because contemplative prayer is troubling me. I don't think it's working.²

I've felt that way at times, have you? Times when it doesn't feel like prayer is working. Times I'm not sure what to ask for. We may feel like the five-year-old girl [who] was attending a formal wedding some years ago with her grandmother. She had been in Sunday school but had never attended a formal church service. During the wedding, the minister said, "Let us pray." Each person bowed his or her head in prayer. The little girl looked around and saw all the heads bowed and eyes turned toward the floor, and she cried, "Grandmother, what are they all looking for?"³

Sometimes in our prayers we may not know what we're looking for, why we're searching for answers to questions that seem too overwhelming and complicated.

It's in these times that we remember Paul's letter to the Romans:

If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. Won't he also freely give us all things with

him?...³⁵ Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...³⁸ I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers³⁹ or height or depth, or any other thing that is created. (8:31-39, CEB)

Isn't that amazing? Even when we cannot find the words to express our deepest distress, nothing can separate us from God. Nothing. Nada.

That's why on this Pentecost Sunday that we celebrate the amazing gift of God's Spirit, a gift that keeps us connected to God in the best of times and the worst of times. A gift that keeps us connected even when we don't know what to say or do. It's that inner voice that guides us. It's that calmness that soothes us in the storms of life. When facing a difficult decision, the Spirit is the one who nudges us in the best direction.

Jesus promised his disciples before he died that they would not be alone, that he would send the Comforter, the Advocate, the Spirit of God as a

continual presence in their lives. Weeks after Jesus died, when the disciples had gathered in a room during the annual Jewish Pentecost harvest festival, I imagine they were still confused about the next step in their lives. They had experienced the risen Christ, and yet, what now? I imagine they wondered: *Where do we go from here? The authorities are still hunting for us, trying to eliminate any stories about the one they tried to destroy. We can't hide forever. How do we let others know what we've experienced?*

And suddenly, they heard what sounded like a wind blowing among them, and it seemed as though flames of fire were dancing around them. They experienced the ability to speak many languages, and they boldly went out of that room into the streets and began telling those gathered for the annual Pentecost festival about what they had experienced. Even though people had gathered from many lands and spoke many languages, amazingly they could understand the disciples. Somehow the language barrier was overcome. If

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death could not stop the news of what God was doing in the world, neither could language.

God breaks into our world in surprising ways. Sometimes boldly. Sometimes subtly. In between these encounters, God's Spirit continues to move among us. Giving us courage to speak up. Comforting us when in distress. Challenging us to make the right choice. Inspiring us to try something new. Inviting us to listen. Sending us out to speak.

We may take the Spirit's presence for granted, not even thinking about the Spirit's movement in our lives, just as we don't think about the oxygen we breath. We often don't contemplate on the

process of our breathing until the air becomes thin and we gasp for oxygen. Often that's when we reach out to God, when our lives feel thin, when our breath is knocked out of us, when we can't find the words to say. That's when the Spirit intercedes and helps express the deep longings within us through wordless sighs.

When you can't find the words to say, trust that God's Spirit still moves within your being, turning your groans and silent sighs into prayers to God.

¹ 2018-19 Program Resources, Clergy Stuff Narrative Lectionary Worship Resources, adapted.

² Christiana N. Peterson, *Mystics and Misfits: Meeting God through St. Francis and Other Unlikely Saints*, 2018, 24-5.

³ Hodgin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 4355-4358). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #704.