

Minneapolis Area Synod Ministerium

Bishop Ann Svennungsen – Sermon (March 23, 2022)

It was three years ago when we gathered for our last spring ministerium - March of 2019. We met at River of Life Lutheran; actually so long ago that the church now has a different name! Two years ago, it became Christ the River of Life after merging with Christ English in North Minneapolis.

That's a long time between Ministeriums. But what's more, think of all that's happened in that time – the Pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, uprisings and protests across the globe, the invasion of Ukraine causing 10 million people to become refugees or internally displaced.

And, what about each of us – personally – in our own homes, with our own families? What about our own mental and physical health?

The American Psychological Association notes that “With longer work hours and increased demands at home, COVID has introduced *new stressors to nearly every domain of life*. The stressors especially affect those with “public facing jobs,” a pretty good description of the job of church leader. “Public facing.” Polarization about masks and vaccines can make us feel unsupported and even cynical. “What’s the use?” we ask. And cynicism, a key indicator of burnout, is like poison because it attacks the value we see in our work. And, when work is hard, when critics are many, sometimes it’s only the value we see in our work, in this calling, that keeps us going!ⁱ

So it might not be hard for us to relate to our text from Romans: “The whole creation groans with the pains of a woman in labor. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, groan for the redemption of our bodies.

I love this text from Romans – chosen today because our liturgy’s title, “Sighs too Deep for Words,” comes from this passage.

First, I love how - right smack in the middle of Paul’s hefty treatise called Romans – there’s this tender description of creation – one of the best in scripture. Creation groans like a woman in labor. And God hears the groans of creation. God doesn’t abandon the world in pain. And, neither

can Christians. We are intimately bound with creation – sharing a common destiny – called to courageous love in this place we call home.

But not only does creation groan – we, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, also groan. Yes, we are saved by grace, united with the living Christ. Chapter 8 begins “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” This is pure gospel.

And yet, even those who are united with Christ still groan – we sigh for the fullness of our redemption. In four short verses, we hear a lot about waiting and hoping. It starts with the image of labor pains – waiting for a birth – and then we hear the word “hope” five times, the word “wait” two times. And, then the hardest word of all, patience. We wait with patience.

It's into that reality that we're told the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we don't know how to express our sighs; we don't know how to pray as we ought. And, here's where grace continues. Usually, I think that the Spirit's help is about skills and strength. The Spirit helps me by teaching me the words, increasing my desire to pray, provoking my commitment to pray more often. But, no, that's not what the text says. The text says, “the Spirit prays for me.”

We are being prayed for by the Spirit. And the Spirit – who knows all our waiting and hoping and sighing – brings our cries to God – even, Paul says, according to God's will. The interface is pretty awesome. The Spirit knows us; the Spirit knows God – and the intercessions reflect all that knowing and align with God's will.

These are stunning promises. I've never thought of this text in quite that way. Could it be that the Holy Spirit is having a running dialog with God about the hopes and sighs of our lives? Could it be that God and the Spirit are in an endless conversation holding your sighs too deep for words?

Oh, there's been a lot of waiting and sighing among church leaders in the time of Covid. We're not sure how it's all going to turn out. Last Sunday I preached at Transfiguration in Bloomington for the Pastor Arthur Murray's farewell. But Arthur wasn't there. He and his family had Covid – so they watched on the farewell worship and program on zoom.

Looking through the rostered leaders' annual reports recently – yes, some folks actually complete their reports - I read a lot more laments than usual. And the laments are vivid, like: I've lost my confidence as a preacher, everything takes more time than it used to, folks aren't coming back to worship like we'd hoped.

In a poll of pastors last October, Barna found that 38 percent of lead pastors seriously considered quitting during the past year. That's almost 2 out of 5 pastors. And the numbers grow with certain groups 46% of those under age 45 have considered quitting; more than 50% of women have considered this; while only a third of men.

As bishop, I feel it's my job to stop this sermon right now and give you all a pep talk to stay in ministry. We need you. It will get better. I promise.

And yet, I also believe it's my job to remind each one of that this is God's church. It is God's will that all experience fullness of life, that all hear the Gospel, that God's reign of justice be known throughout the whole world. It is God's church. Not ours. God sent a Savior – and it's not you, not me. And, God calls people to an incredible variety of vocations – all in service to the Gospel, the work of justice, compassion, and the common good.

But, let me give you this kind of Bishop's Pep Talk. If you think you want to choose another vocation, don't do it until you've had time for lots of prayer and conversation. Don't quit on a bad day; don't even quit during a bad season. Oh, if the days get too bad, too hard, you may need to take a leave of absence – and if there's push back from your church council, bring us into the conversation.

Wait until you're in a place of reasonable health. Wait, until you've received wise counsel from mentors and friends, until you've prayed it through with family and pastors.

On Tuesday, many of us were privileged to hear Pastor Ingrid Rasmussen and Pastor Angela Khabeb present the Fosdick Lecture at Augsburg. This is just one of the many memorable insights they shared, "We are people with broken hearts. It's good to admit it. We live between the world as it is and the world as it should be." But, they continued, we believe nothing is beyond redemption.

No person; No system – not even the church – is beyond the transformative work of God. Nothing is beyond redemption.

Yes, when we see the gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be, we sometimes find ourselves crying – even like a woman in labor – pleading for the arrival of a new creation – a world of justice and equity.

What is more, we may be crying because we really have no idea how to close the gap. How do we dismantle racism and patriarchy, how do we close the violent gap between the rich and the poor?

The Conference of Bishops spent two days in anti-racism training last month. It was an extraordinary experience. As our conference grows more diverse – six of our 65 bishops are now people of color – the conversations are more real than ever – and sometimes more uncomfortable. One of my favorite colleagues put it well when she said: “Those two days were some of the most painful of my professional life – but also some of the most hopeful.”

A nice summary of our Romans text – we are free in Christ to both groan in our pain and hold fast to our hope.

And, maybe, just maybe, the Spirit is praying for us right now – interceding for the sake of redemption. No, we don’t know how to exactly to be healers of the breach – we don’t know how to transform systems of violence or exclusion. Maybe the Spirit is interceding for us right now – bringing to God our pleas for guidance – and bringing to us hope and inspiration that we can take the next step toward the birth of new ways toward fullness of life for all.

Nothing is beyond redemption. Not you; not me. The steadfast, eternal love of God is sure.

And, in the extraordinary words that close this chapter, hear this God news: nothing - neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

ⁱ (American Psychological Association. January 1, 2022)