

Too Deep for Words

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How many times have you reached the point in a conversation. Or maybe in a whole relationship, where you simply no longer know what to say?

Most of us have reached a point with someone at one point or another where we just throw up our hands, because it seems like there is no way that our words could possibly do any good.

Or have you ever sat before one you loved who was in great pain. Grieving a hard loss. Or facing a harrowing diagnosis. More often than not, we do not have the words for these moments. We simply do not know what to say.

And have you ever tried to describe something so astonishingly beautiful that even the most poetic language you can muster falls flat, and you are left with that slightly helpless feeling of being unable to convey to another what you yourself have encountered?

Our words are powerful things. Language is something like a superpower. The ability to convey, coordinate, counsel, console, with sounds and shared meaning.

But all of us know of moments where words fail us. Where not even our most powerful language holds up to the potency of a moment.

Sometimes, in relationship with one another, our words fail.

And as often as this happens in our human relationships with one another. This can also happen in our relationship with God.

Our words can fail.

We can desire to pray, but find that we cannot find words to name what our hearts hold. We can pause to connect with the Holy and find instead that our minds wander and drift through to-do lists, assorted worries, and peculiar musings.

Sometimes it is like sitting in front of our grieving friend. The emotions are just too big for language. We are afraid to even touch these most tender emotions for fear of what we might unleash.

Sometimes it is like that moment of exasperation, where things seem so far gone down the wrong track that our words feel futile. What good could it possibly do?

And other times, it may be just that what we desire to name is simply ineffable. That it is too beautiful or profound to even be approached by our language.

But, whatever the reason. It is not uncommon for us to find ourselves paused before the almighty, without words.

That can be a lonely feeling. That can make God feel quite distant. Quite abstract.

Scripture gives us these beautiful words from Paul's Letter to the Romans.

Paul writes: "The Spirit helps us, for we do not know how to pray, but the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

I have always had this image that we have all these prayers in our hearts. All these hopes, fears, desires, gratitude, and praise. And as we name them one after another, they rise from our heart into God's.

"I am so grateful for my family."

"Please help me stay calm during that hard conversation tomorrow."

"Bring healing to my grandmother."

"Keep my child safe."

One by one these prayers arise, as we put them into words, and lift them up to God.

And then, when we are done. There is still something left unsaid. A sort of residue. Of, who knows what, and maybe for a while we don't even notice.

And what scripture is teaching us here is that by the power of the Holy Spirit, God can pour into our hearts to lift all that we could not name out of us as a sigh, as a groan, and something beyond language, but that nonetheless carries as a prayer into God's own heart.

So that we can be unburdened of even that which we cannot yet quite touch, or name.

I sometimes reach the end of my prayers, and can almost sense that residue, I can feel that there is something that has not quite found expression in my prayer, but that is still residing in my heart, and so, I take a deep breath, imagining that I am drawing in God's spirit, and let it out, as a big sigh, sending with it the prayers my mind could not name.

I offer you this practice, as an end to your prayer, or as an entire prayer. Breath in, praying "I lift my prayers..." Sigh out praying "too deep for words..."

I lift my prayers... Too deep for words...

Because just like in our human relationships, of course our ability to connect does not end with our words. Our words fail us before friends, but a smile, or an embrace will still speak the truth of our heart.

And it is even more so true with God. That our ability to connect is not limited by the words we devise.

Which is the second half of today's reading. After sharing this about the Spirit's intercession in our prayer. Paul moves to say:

"For I am convinced that that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Which is the beating heart of our faith. It is the shelter we can find in any storm.

Nothing. Nothing. Can separate you from the love of God. Nothing can break your connection with God.

All of us are living through a moment where we may find more, and more, that our words fail. I have noticed that “how are you holding up” has replaced the customary “how are you doing” for a lot of us.

And most of us by now have probably developed answers that say something true, but do not express the fullness of our struggle and our fear.

Of course we don't want to bear our soul to every passing acquaintance the way we might want to pour our heart before God.

But, I also think we just haven't found all the words yet for the ways in which this moment is hard.

It is a sort of added layer of isolation. But it need not isolate us from God.

For nothing in all of creation, can separate us from God. And when our words fail, God's spirit will pray with in us. Lifting from our hearts sighs too deep for words.

There is this old apocryphal story, that has been in so many sermons by now that its origins are impossible to trace.

The story goes that a mother walked past her young daughter's room one night astonished to find her kneeling beside her bed praying.

Dear God, A, B, C, D, E, F, G...

What are you doing? her mother stopped to ask.

“Saying my prayers” the young girl responded.

“I can't really think of the right words tonight, so I am just going to say all the letters.”

“I know God will put them together for me.”