

May 22, 2022
Rev. Kerry Smith

The Beauty of the Church—Living in a Good Friday World
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Romans 8:22–27 (New Revised Standard Version)

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

I don't want to exaggerate, but I want you to know that Romans 8 is the greatest chapter about the Holy Spirit in the entire New Testament. We hear in Romans 8 that all who are led by the Spirit of God are God's beloved children. It then tells the story of how Jesus' story becomes our story.

We are in the fifty great days of Easter and we are talking about the beauty of the church. We want you to learn some Greek, so the word on the front of your bulletin says *ekklesia* which is translated as church. We come together once a week on our holy day to worship God and to support one another as we live as followers of Christ. We are looking forward to Pentecost, the fiftieth day of Easter when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a force that moves in and through us, urging us, calling us. Perhaps you have felt the Spirit calling you to recommit to daily prayer and Scripture reading. Or you have felt prompted to reach out to a friend you have not spoken to in years. Maybe you have felt empowered to serve others in new ways.

One of the things I love most about church is that this is a faith community where I find hope. We live in a Good Friday world full of suffering, questioning, unfairness, trouble, mistakes, hurts, losses and grief. But, we are Easter people. I love in the passage that we just read how it talks about the groaning of creation and of humanity. We see at Christmas when God becomes one of us in Jesus and we see at Jesus' death on the cross that God boldly enters into the brokenness of the world. The groaning Spirit shows us that God stays with the broken world all the way through to the end. But the end, in fact, is the new beginning.

Until then we wait with hope and with patience. It is a watchful, expectant waiting that does not give in to despair, even when little evidence of hope is in sight. May we remember today that we are not left alone in our waiting and struggle, because "the Spirit helps us in our weakness". Even though we don't know how or what to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us with "inarticulate groans" translated as "with sighs too deep for words." Just as we groan together with the whole creation, the Spirit groans together with and for us.

Today we are celebrating our graduating Seniors. They have been raised in this church, taught by you, loved by you, and been prayed for by you. We send them off into this world knowing that it is a Good Friday world. We know that they will suffer and struggle just as we do.

Just a few years ago, many of these graduating Seniors were being Confirmed as they made real their faith and joined Greenland Hills UMC. I thought that I would be okay Confirming my own kid, but when I went to lay my hands on her head, there was a huge group of family, church family, and friends who surrounded her. I prayed the Confirming prayer, "May the Holy Spirit work within you, that having been born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ," and my voice broke and I did not keep it together. I was overwhelmed with the love for my daughter and for all of the Confirmands because no one stood

alone. There were Sunday School teachers, church friends, people who were family and all of them were saying by their presence, I'm here. I stand with you. You will never be alone.

There are times when we feel like we have to have life figured out and the reality is we don't have anything figured out. In the early 2000s there was a popular book by Rick Warren called *The Purpose Driven Life*. I led a study at the church I was at and 93 year old Dot Shaw came. We went around the circle talking about why we were there and what we hoped to learn and Dot Shaw said, "I want to figure out why I'm here and what God wants me to do next." Dot Shaw gave me such hope because I didn't have to have it all figured out, I just had to be on the journey. And Dot Shaw was on the journey with me.

Being a part of a church family means that we love everyone in this place and we pray for one another because, in case you haven't figured it out yet, life is hard. In the Scripture passage we read in Romans, Paul wants us to know that there is no exemption from suffering for followers of Christ. We may be children of God, but that doesn't mean we get a free pass from the suffering of creation. Instead, as children of God we are drawn more deeply into solidarity with our suffering world. We hurt when we see the brokenness of the world and when we see people hurting. And the Spirit groans with us and intercedes for us, giving us hope.

As children of God, we are one with creation in suffering, longing, and hope for God's promised redemption which still lies in the future. In the meantime, there is groaning as we work to transform human life and God's created world. It is painful and often messy, as the image of the creation in labor pains implies. The gift of new life is beautiful, but it emerges out of struggle. This week my family heard some sad news that my stepbrother had died by suicide. He had struggled with drug addiction and mental illness and refused treatment, was in and out of jail, and in and out of mental institutions. But he was the one who called Communion Snack Sunday, when my mom took him to church when he was twelve. His older brother also died by suicide.

There is no single cause of suicide. It most often occurs when stressors exceed current coping abilities. Some warning signs are change in behavior or entirely new behaviors. Things like withdrawing from activities, isolating from family and friends, lack of sleep or too much sleep, or change in concentration. How can we help? What can we do? We can assure someone that we will be there and that there is help. It is okay to say to someone I don't know what the answers are, but I'm going to be here for you. I'm not going to leave you. There is help and this isn't the forever step that you want to take. We are privileged here at Greenland Hills to have the Executive Director at the Mental Health America of Greater Dallas, Bonnie Cook, as a part of our church family. You are not alone, there is help. Please reach out to me.

Our scripture for today tells us God is not yet finished with the world and we all long for better. God's Spirit is groaning right along with us, as we express our pain, our fears, and our dreams to God in petitions that are too deep for us to put into words. The question for all of us is how we can engage our hurting world, what good can we do today as we trust that the Spirit is constantly working in human weakness to bring about God's wholeness. Do you remember during the pandemic when air pollution dropped in such visible ways? It was short-lived but it painted a picture of how we affect the earth and how it can be healed.

How might we change the world? Our baptism calls us out into the world to work for justice, to be a voice for those whose voices are not heard, to advocate for those still on the margins and not seen, to leverage whatever power we have to help create a more just, a more merciful, a more hope-filled world. We do those things because we are followers of Jesus and we have been given the gift of the Spirit and that is what courageous faithfulness looks like. We as a

church are to stand up and speak. To breathe in God's courage and to offer hope into the brokenness and tragedy of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.