

## **From the depths**

Mark 7:31-27

March 4, 2018

Sigh ...

What is a sigh? It is a letting go, a release of air, a release of built up pressure. It might be a release of the pressure of built up anxiety, a sigh of relief: "Whew." Or it might be a release of the pressure of disappointed expectations, a sigh of resignation: "Oh, well." A sigh is an expression of emotion -- relief, resignation, powerlessness. What can I do? What can anybody do?

But a groan is different. Groan ...

A groan is a cousin to a sigh, but more raw, more intense, and it comes from a deeper place. Quite literally, it comes from a deeper place! A sigh comes from the lungs, but a groan from the gut, from the depths, from the depths of our bodies and from the depths of our souls.

A groan is an outward expression, or even an outward eruption, of our most raw and unfiltered and most genuine feelings. It is us at our most human and it is us at our most humane, because a groan "from the depths" shows we have depths. It is an indicator of deep feeling, of care, of desire, of compassion, of longing.

If sighing is a letting go, what is groaning? In his article on στεναζω in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (στεναζω is the Greek word we translate as "groan"), J. Schneider writes:

*[Groaning] takes place by reason of a condition of oppression under which [we] suffer and from which [we long] to be free.*

It is a longing for freedom, for freedom from oppression, of whatever sort. It is a longing for "our" freedom, because I may groan, not just on my own behalf, but yours, too.

Jesus groaned ... twice. Mark's gospel records Jesus groaning two times in very short order, under very different circumstances, but for similar reasons. Mark is the only gospel that remembers Jesus groaning, but it is good we have this record, to let us see this Jesus groaning like we do -- or is it us groaning like he does? -- groaning from the depths of his being.

The first time Jesus groaned was when they brought him a man who could not hear and who could barely speak. They, those who brought the man to Jesus, begged Jesus to place his hands on him. They wanted him to be healed. They wanted this man for whom they cared to be made well, so they begged Jesus on his behalf. Begging is a kind of prayer, isn't it? An urgent, passionate kind of prayer.

Jesus took him off alone, away from the crowd. Why did Jesus take him off alone? Maybe to protect his privacy, to guard his dignity, but certainly so as

not to make a show. Jesus' acts of healing were never about making a show, never about drawing attention to himself, but only about doing good, never about him, the healer, but always about you, the one in need of healing.

Jesus took him off alone, placed his hands on ears and on his tongue, and looked up to heaven. Jesus looked up to heaven, raising his face to God in prayer, and gave a deep groan! Jesus' groan is his prayer, groaning to God.

That's the way he taught us to pray, isn't it? "Your kingdom come!" Can you say that, really say that, without passion, without groaning? Jesus' groan is a longing, an intense and raw desire for freedom, for the freedom of this man, for the freedom of all humanity, for the freedom of all creation.

And the healing is not just a sign, a proof, but an in-breaking of God's kingdom itself. That was Jesus' message: the kingdom of God is coming. It is near. It is so near that it is already breaking in. See that? God is healing you! See that? God is forgiving your sins! See that? God is welcoming you to his feast!

The second time Jesus groaned was with some Pharisees. They asked Jesus to perform a miracle, but it was a trap. What if Jesus said, "All right, I will show you," and failed? The Pharisees would be proved right, that Jesus is no prophet sent by God, and most certainly no Messiah.

But what if Jesus said, "All right, I will show you," and succeeded? If he did their bidding instead of God's? If he felt compelled to justify himself in their eyes, instead of seeking God's pleasure, instead seeking God's kingdom above everything else? In either case, all that he came to do would be made a mockery and all those he came to serve would be betrayed.

They asked him to perform a miracle, and he groaned! A groan of disgust? I don't think so. It is still a prayer, a prayer for God's kingdom to come, a prayer for humanity to be set free from our ignorance, from our pride, from our sorry refusal to recognize God's grace, God's mercy, God's overflowing generosity when it is right in front of our eyes. Jesus saw these pitiful men enslaved to their own need to be right, blinding themselves and doing their best to blind others to the movement of the Spirit of God among them and he groaned. He groaned for them and he groaned for those they were mis-leading. He groaned, and he left, having done no miracle.

Jesus groaned. From the depths. From the depths of his being. From the depths of his longing, his fierce longing for God's kingdom to come, his fierce longing for the day when all creation would be set free.

One day it will be. Which is why groaning has nothing to do with despair. Groaning is an expression of longing, of an impassioned desire for things to be as they should be, and as such, groaning is an emblem of hope. One day there will be no more grief or crying or pain, or groaning.

But in the meanwhile we groan. We groan together with Jesus, together with God's Spirit, together with all of creation, waiting ... waiting ... waiting ... waiting and living for that day.