

WITH SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR WORDS

The Reverend Peter F. Walsh
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The Car

I used to drive an old broken down Volvo sedan. The car had so little value that someone just gave it to us. I loved that car, but it had issues. The engine was great, but the body was rusted out. The heater was hot enough to smoke meat but the air conditioner did not work. I used to say it did not matter because it had a backup air conditioning system. All you had to do was accelerate. There were so many rusted holes in the car that if you drove fast enough you could feel the breeze.

The Icon

There was a little shelf below the dash board, next to where the air conditioning did not come out. On that shelf I kept an icon. It was a picture of someone praying. You could not tell if it was a male or a female. Inside this person there was a circle over the heart. Inside the circle of the heart there was a picture of Jesus praying within. The icon was pretty beaten up. It was sun-drenched and faded, scratched and nicked. When my kids were little they used to put their grimy, ketchup laden fingers on it. Sometimes it would fall face down on the floor during winter and sit on the slush of road salt and melting snow. We would just pick it up and put it on the dash and off we went.

Icon is Us

I loved that icon because that icon is us – you and me. It portrays the messy holiness of our

lives. In a kind of crazy dignified way it proclaimed deep and abiding truths about our lives.

A Bit Worn

We are a lot like that icon in that most of us are a little worn. We are not quite that shimmering new model we once were. Most of us have fallen face down in the slush, both literally and figuratively. I do not know anybody who has not had their struggles, who is not a bit nicked and scratched. Everything does not go our way. Sometimes it feels like the world is against us. Paul gives us a few words for that in the Letter to the Romans this morning, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” Some of us are a little worn out by the kids.

Sometimes we feel powerful, and sometimes we feel just too weak to make everything work out in our lives. And yet we continue to function. We drive around in our cars doing our daily business.

The Icon's Deeper Truth

The icon also points to a deeper truth than life can be wearing. This is the praying Christ at the heart of the icon. The truth is the Spirit of Christ is deep in the heart and soul of each of us.

I tell you about this icon because it illuminates in part what St. Paul is talking about. St. Paul tells us in his writings that the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, is deep within each of us

and is high in the heavens. The passage from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans tells us, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness." St. Paul wants us to know there is help for a weary soul right in the midst of the messiness of our lives. If you doubt this power, ask someone in recovery. If you are feeling like that icon, a bit worn out, there is help to be had in your heart.

Icon Truth: God Prays within Us

Paul then goes on with one of my favorite teachings about prayer, "For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the very Spirit of God intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

For we do not know how to pray as we ought, who amongst us feels as though their prayer life is perfect? Who has a perfect relationship with our Lord? Who is in perfect communication with the Lord? Do we not all feel inadequate in prayer no matter how much we pray?

Paul continues, "But the very Spirit of God intercedes." This is good news. God intercedes to do what we cannot do. This is crazy. Does it not seem as though we should be praying to God, worshipping God, yet God intercedes for us.

With Sigh Too Deep For Words

How does God intercede? With sighs too deep for words. This is a mystical teaching.

Is it not true that when it comes to the deepest things in life, words do not get the job done. There are no words for the deepest and most powerful things in our lives, for our deepest needs. That is why we cry and sigh. Crying and sighing emanate from the depths of our being. When the Spirit sighs it emanates from the depths of our being. The word Spirit comes from the Latin word for breath or to sigh. In other words, the Holy Spirit is the Holy breath or the Holy Sigh of God. Out of the depths of our being comes

the sigh of God, the Spirit of God, the breath of God. This is particularly exciting for those who meditate, who begin to feel as though they are breathing with breath of God within.

If God be For Us

Paul continues, "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." Like divine GPS, God searches the heart for the Spirit of God within us and registers that prayer into the deepest being of God. From the depths of our being into the depth of the being of God. It is a God to God communication about us that is in accordance with the will of God about what is best for us. From our being to God's being about our well being. There a holiness buried within us that is at work all the time seeking to guide us. Back to silent presence of that icon. It is as though God is meditating within us all the time, even when we are not praying, not thinking of God, going about our daily business, and going through our struggles. There deep within us God is at prayer.

The Love of Christ

So, no matter where you go, on the road or off the road of life, the Spirit and love of Jesus is there, deep in the bowls of your being and in the highest heavens. St. Paul's letter continues, *Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

If Paul were speaking for us all today, perhaps he would say something like...Neither the death of my spouse, nor the deficit, nor debt ceiling, nor depression, nor drinking, nor disappointments, nor doubting, nor drifting away from my spiritual life, nor financial fear,

nor fractured pelvis, nor mortgages, nor unemployment, nor monumental screw-ups, nor relationships good, bad, and indifferent , nor problems today, nor the problems that attack in the middle of the night, nor things I fear the most can separate me from the love of Christ. No matter what, no matter where you go, the Spirit of Christ is always there in the depths of your being and in the highest heavens, being with you, loving you, advocating for you, interceding for you, with prayers that are sighs too deep for words.
Amen.