

What We Do Not Know

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And there is at the center of reality a groan. It's not the kind of groan that we make when we're pushing a lawn mower through thick grass. It's not the kind of groan that you utter when you first approach a sink full of dirty dishes. It's not the kind of groan you hear from students when they first look at the exam questions. It's a deeper groan. It's not even the groan that we involuntarily utter when we find ourselves inarticulate before the inexplicably beautiful or awesome. We have all known that, especially those of you who lecture and who preach. You have known that, you have been surprised by that. All of us know that there are things that we can shout easily enough. There are some things we can only whisper, and there are other things we can hardly say at all. We draw our breath in pain to say them. They are so profoundly important that we cannot go chattering along anymore. You have known that. Sometimes when you have prepared your words for the lecture, or for the sermon, and then suddenly realize what those words really said and meant and became overwhelmed by your own message, and your words moved into a groan and then into silence.

I didn't know there was a groan in the ministry when I started out in my leather girdle and camel's hair days. I thought I was supposed to be everywhere and say everything—whatever the subject, whatever the text, talk about it, freely and easily, make it clear and simple. It didn't matter what the text was. You can take a pint of text and make a peck of words out of it. They never came too tough—Jesus cursing the fig tree—no problem. Abraham offering Isaac on Mt. Moriah—no sweat. Jesus on the mount of transfiguration—a piece of cake. I could come down from the mount of transfiguration chattering like a magpie. “You should have been with us up there. We really saw something. Was that really great...oh, it was great.” Even though Jesus said to those three, “I don't want you to talk about this until after Easter.”

Oh, I've heard this groan a number of times when I taught in a little school in Oklahoma beginning in 1961. I hadn't been there long till I began to subscribe to a little newspaper in a neighboring town, *Kingfisher Oklahoma Free Press* it was called; came out every Friday. I didn't read anything in it, I didn't know anybody there, except it carried an article every Friday by a woman named Molly Shepherd. Molly Shepherd was an Arapaho Cheyenne Indian, well along in years, and with broken English (as was often the English of the squaws who didn't get out in public much in those days). In broken English, but beautiful and moving, she told stories about the giveaways among the Indians, about the funerals, about the weddings, about the blanket parties, all kinds of things. I enjoyed them. They were brief. The sentences were unusual, but delightful. I sometimes cut them out and sent them to my brother who was an editor of a newspaper to see how he would respond to her words. I recall her article on the Friday following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Her article was the briefest I had read and the briefest I was ever to read from her—very few sentences. She said, “Molly has no article today. Molly has no words today. Molly cannot speak today. Molly goes through the house saying ooh, ooh, ooh.” You know the groan.

But I'm not thinking of that. I'm thinking of a deeper groan, a deeper, deeper groan. The groan of which Paul speaks when he said, "all creation groans." So deep is that groan you can't hear it but you know it's there. Since Genesis 3, whence the crash of all the good that God had created, because of the sin of man and woman, because of human sin, all creation fell and became subject to futility and decay. "Thorns and thistles, cursed is the ground for your sake," and so it all began—futility, frustration, conflicted, marred and scarred and hurt. Oh, it doesn't show up all the time. Creation lots of times is as gentle and quiet and comfortable as anything. In the spring of the year, when the meadows are turning somersaults of joy and the world is a poem of light and color and butterflies flutter up from every little buttercup. You'd think, "Where is the frustration and decay and futility?" It's not here. Shakespeare says there are sermons in stones, books in the running brooks, tongues in trees, good in everything, and a lot of times that's the way it is.

Do you remember the beautiful little story, *The Education of Little Tree*, Forrest Carter's story of the part Indian boy in western North Carolina? Do you remember the part in there when the boy had been told he had to go away to a special school? He didn't want to go. He learned enough from his grandma and grandpa. He didn't want to go. "You have to go, it's the law. You have to go." He took one last run through his beloved creation and the bushes brushed his cheek and said, "Don't go." Stream lapped at his ankles and said, "Don't go." The briars along the path would cling to his trousers and say, "Don't go." Such harmony between human beings and nature and then suddenly nature throws a fit, almost suicidal, like an animal tearing its own flesh she bleats out and destroys her own lovely landscapes, destroys her fellow creatures, hurts everything in sight, and then, grows calm again. And we venture out of our houses, and walk down to the beach, and see the sun sizzling into the sea. An angry wave comes in from out in the deep, toward us on the beach. "I'm gonna drown you," it says. But then it begins to laugh, heh, and falls like a child at your feet and rolls over and you scratch its soft underside and it goes gangling back out to sea. And you say, "I forgive creation for that fit she threw. But when will it happen again? Creation is so frustrated and subject to decay and then to have her fellow creatures, you and me, scrape it off and pollute it and ruin it and poison it and hurt it. No wonder the retaliation. All creation groans. When will the groaning stop? Paul says, "Creation is standing at the window, looking out in keen anticipation for the redemption of the children of God, for just as it was our sin that brought creation into subjection to decay and death, it is our redemption that shall bring life." And creation will look out the window and one day will see the pageantry of Eden again—but not till then.

There is the groan, and Paul says we groan too. We groan too. The children of God groan. After all, we are creatures. We are a part of creation. We are brothers and sisters of all that comes storming through. We groan too, vulnerable, vulnerable to everything of night and day that comes along and touches us. Of course we groan. I know Paul must have groaned, especially he said we groan for the redemption of our body. We plead redemption for a new body. He must have felt that so keenly. The shape his body was in. Just imagine. "Five times I was lashed thirty-nine strikes. Three times I was bruised with the Roman rods." "I was once stoned," he said, "and left for dead." "I spent twenty-four hours in the cold water. I have been hungry and naked. I have been without drink or food. I have been chased in the country. I have been chased in the city. I have been hated by enemies. I have been hated by friends.

And on top of all that, the pressure of constant concern for the churches. Ooh how we groan for the redemption of the body” (2 Cor. 11: 24-28).

But it isn’t just Paul. It isn’t just those who drag a useless limb or a curved spine or deal with sightless eyes. It’s all of us, because we have been given the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit quickens, quickens our anticipation for complete redemption of beauty and wholeness and newness. It’s true of all of us, but the tough part of that is that the Holy Spirit not only quickens and accelerates our hope for the new creation, but that same Spirit makes us more sensitive to the way things are, intensifies the pain as we feel the difference between the way things can be and the way things are. That tension is the groan. All Christians I have ever known or about whom I have read, who take creation seriously, take other people seriously, take themselves seriously—at the center of their lives was a groan.

When I was studying for the ministry, the battles we fought were over the social gospel. Some of you are old enough to remember reading about that. I know this is ancient history, but permit me. I’m emeritus. Take it easy on me here. Most of the leaders of the social gospel in America had bought into the quest for the historical Jesus, had discarded a lot of the heavy tomes about sin and had adopted the idea of reacquainting themselves with Jesus and knowing Jesus and following Jesus. And I read these—*A Theology For The Social Order*, Walter Rauschenbush. Boy, did I mark that up. Those social gospel people have a Christology that’s as thin as a rail. There is not enough there to preach and I marked up the book you know, until I listened to Edwin Dalburg talk about Walter Rauschenbush.

Dr. Dalburg said, “I was in his class one day, the morning following the bond issue in Rochester, New York, where he taught. Dr. Rauschenbush had spent his time, apart from preparing and delivering lectures, working for this bond issue that would bring sewage and fresh water and cleanliness and sanitation to a large poor section of the city. The bond issue came to the voters. The next morning Dr. Rauschenbush came into class. He had the newspaper under his arm. He opened up his notes. He looked again at the paper, held it up to the class—‘Bond Issue Defeated.’ He started his lecture,” Dr. Dalburg said, “and then put his head over on the desk. His shoulders shook and he cried like a baby.” And I quit marking his book; because he groaned.

I heard Albert Schweitzer groan. I wasn’t proud of it at the time. I’m beginning to be a little proud of it. Albert Schweitzer is sort of the Mother Theresa of my generation. I had read his *Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Boy did I mark that up. Umph, there is not enough here to keep the church alive. There are not enough calories in this to last two weeks. Oh, I marked that thing up. I wrote a paper on it. My professor gave me an “A”—good paper. Then I read in the newspaper that Dr. Schweitzer was coming to Cleveland, Ohio, to play a dedicatory concert on the big organ in a large church. He was, you know, not only theologian and medical doctor and philosopher and everything else. He was also an organist. I took my paper that I wrote for the professor. I took my volume *Quest for the Historical Jesus* and took my marginal notes and framed them into a series of questions, because, according to the paper, after the concert Dr. Schweitzer was going to be in fellowship hall and have an informal time with those in attendance. Ha, ha, I went. I rode the Greyhound bus to Cleveland, Ohio. I heard the concert, but the good part was yet to come. I rushed downstairs to sit on the front row of the chairs assembled there, and there was punch and there were cookies and there were peanuts. Oh, and we ate and nibbled and we drank a bit and waited for

his appearance. Finally he came in with a cup of tea. He was about seventy-five years old. His hair was white and long. His mustache was bushy—I think about seventy-five. I had my questions—surely there would be question/answer time. He got up and said, “I thank you for your hospitality, for your gracious reception of me, but I have to go back to Lambarene in Africa. My people there are dying. They are sick and they are hungry. If any of you have in you the love of Jesus come help me.” I looked at my questions. Of all the stupid silly stuff that I was going to ask this man, who stood in front of us, and groaned.

Paul said that God groans. Did you notice that? God groans in Romans 8:26. We don’t know how to pray as we ought, but the Holy Spirit which knows the mind of God, knows the will of God, intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. What is that talking about? That God is in conversation with God about us, for us, in our behalf? What is that talking about? I will tell you what it’s talking about. It’s saying that God is praying for us with groans too deep for words. I can’t say any more about that. I don’t know any more about that. I once heard Jesus groan. Mark says he was in Decapolis and they brought him a man who was a deaf mute and they said, “Rabbi, can you help him?” And Jesus touched his tongue and put his fingers in his ears and then Mark says, “...and Jesus looked up to Heaven, and groaned.”

There is at the center of reality a groan. And the closer to the center you live, the more you will hear it and the more you will share in it: the center of creation, the center of the church, the center of ministry, the center of those things that belong to the people of God, and the center of the human race. The closer you move there, the more you will hear the groan—the more you will share the groan. And you will recognize it. In the meantime, please, don’t add groaning to the curriculum. Under church administration: how to orchestrate the groanings of the local congregation. Under worship: liturgical groaning. Don’t have any groaning retreats. After all, by the time you work on that the groan may be obsolete. Because you see, Paul says that the groan in creation, in us, in God, is a groan not of death, not the death throes; but, a groan of childbirth. God is giving birth to something new. God is doing something fresh. God is creating new heaven, new earth, and by the time I have mastered the groan, I will have to exchange it—for a WOW!