



LESSONS IN LIVING

“Will You Let Your Heart Break?”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Rev. Erica Knisely
October 26, 2025

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:22-28 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

We know that from the beginning until now, all of creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth. And not only creation, but all of us who possess the first fruits of the Spirit—we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free. In hope we were saved. But hope is not hope if its object is seen; why does one hope for what one sees? And hoping for what we cannot see means awaiting it with patient endurance. The Spirit, too, comes to help us in our weakness. For we don't know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit expresses our plea with groanings too deep for words. And God, who knows everything in our hearts, knows perfectly well what the Spirit is saying, because her intercessions for God's holy people are made according to the mind of God. We know that God makes everything work together for the good of those who love God and have been called according to God's purpose.

Sermon

I didn't expect joy. Not sitting on a rocky path in the Arkansas woods with a mosquito buzzing at my ear. Not after letting my heart break open and let all of the disturbing thoughts and feelings that I've been having, probably since the pandemic, just out all at once. Those thoughts that perhaps there is no redeeming humankind. Perhaps we are a plague upon the Earth. Is there any good? My confessions unfolded into tears that unfolded into a realization that I have been putting my faith in progress. That things were getting better.

I would have told you, intellectually, I didn't believe that. Progress is a myth, but the rest of me must have been holding on to that. Hadn't things been getting better just to get demolished and bulldozed in a moment's time? Or was it just getting better for some and not for others? I didn't expect joy, letting out the dread that had been living in my bones, that sense of futility. That thing I've been trying to hold back for so long now. But there it was. Joy in the moss and the mushrooms on a fallen tree. Joy in a turtle peeking out through the leaves. Joy in the way I just felt lighter and more free as I walked down off the mountain. Like I could *breathe* more deeply and love more fully.

It's a peculiar divine math, releasing these terrible thoughts and feelings, adding to that, tears, adding to that presence. And that didn't add up to answers or solutions, but to a greater capacity for love. Now, a youth in the early service afterwards said I should call that a divine calculation.

But I'll say since then, I have felt more prone to compassion than to frustration, more apt to feel mercy rather than judgment. I wonder, why do we fight so hard to hold in those feelings and to keep them at bay?

If we turn back to our scripture this morning. This is part of the apostle Paul's larger theological treatise that he's unfolding. At the beginning of this piece of scripture, he talks about how all of creation, including all of us, is *groaning*, is groaning, in misery. He likens that to birth pangs, like this expectant pain. Expectant, expecting hope and redemption, the world made whole. He talks a lot about hope. Then it ends with this declaration that in all things, God is somehow still working for the good.

It begins with hope, and it ends in this fulfillment of hope. But what is there in between? That space where we dwell. Parker Palmer calls this place, this space, the *tragic gap*. This place between what is and what could and should be, the tragic gap. And he says that gap is huge. That's where we dwell. We dwell in that tragic gap. I think we feel that pretty acutely these days. Just adding on to the normal struggles of being human, dealing with illness and disease and death and loneliness and all of that regular human pain, we are met every day with images of senseless cruelty, unfettered greed, violence. It's so unnecessary. Why? For what? It's tragic. And yet here we are.

How are we to live in this tragic gap? I don't mean live, just get by, get through, but I mean live with some sense of purpose, maybe even some joy. Cultivate what is most important and valuable about being human. Because there's a lot – there is a lot that we don't have control over, but we do have choices. We have a choice about how we live. We can choose to give in to futility, cynicism, nihilism. What's the point anyway? And all of us have felt that and maybe feel that right now. Or we can choose to embrace an idealism that says, It's going to be okay. God's got this. Just get to heaven and everything's going to work itself out. Forget about the present. We can tune out, ignore it, push it in, push it down, keep going like everything is still the same. And, I think we all need to do that some days, right?

But it's over the long haul that we can feel really empty, inadequate. Those aren't our only choices. We can also choose to live as broken-hearted people, people who know our own hearts and who work to keep them open. Will you let your heart break? Will you keep your heart open and more able to love? Because there's real risk in it. This isn't some sweet sentimentality that we're talking about. This is grappling with the really terrible and difficult things about being human. We risk, when we do this, losing our framework for making sense of the world. We risk losing a firm grasp of who we are, of our own identity, at least momentarily. We risk not being able to put the pieces back together.

But there's also promise in the risk. Promise of something better, promise of breath, of life, of a heart that's more able to love, of good somehow still working within all of it. There's also a promise that we don't enter into this work alone. In between hope and the fulfillment of hope, Paul writes about the spirit. The spirit is often symbolized by breath, by wind, by wisdom, by presence. In the Greek, it says literally, the spirit vigorously cooperates with us at our lowest points, at our weakest. It comes alongside us to help and joins us in our groanings, in the pain that all of us and all of creation feels. That those groans are a size too deep for words, this primal

groaning, inexpressible in language. Paul says, the heart-searching one, the heart-searching God, hears us, knows, responds.

I don't know what your experience has been or what it will be, but time and time again, when I have hit my lowest point, my weakest point, sitting on a mountainside, crying my eyes out, staring down at the abyss and just wondering if I'll ever come out of it, I have been met with love, and a peace and a joy that is inexplicable.

I was not on that mountain alone. It wasn't just me, a whole bunch of moss, a cute little turtle. It was more than that. It was more. Then I walked down off of the trail and into a supportive community of my peers, people who I could share a little bit of that experience with and trust that they wouldn't try to silence it or push it down or dismiss it, who could just hold it. I think there's a component of heart-breaking, heart-opening that requires solitude. For me, it often happens in nature. I think there's also a component that requires community, supportive community, a sacred container of some sort to hold that experience.

I want to say, too, not every time is the right time for your heart to break. Sometimes the conditions aren't right, yet. But we can't outrun it. Not forever. Sometimes heart breaking needs professional support, especially if you're dealing with a lot of trauma. It also doesn't have to be dramatic. If you are not as stubborn as I am about keeping it all together, keeping the emotions in, if you don't have the pridefulness that I have about my ability to weather hard things, then it doesn't have to be so dramatic.

It can happen in little ways every day. A couple more quotes from Parker Palmer. He has been a good conversation partner for me in this. He said,

I've thought a lot about the fact that there are two ways for the heart to break. It can shatter into shards and just lie on the floor, never to get up. Or you can exercise your heart on a daily basis by taking in the little losses, the little deaths, the things that feel hard to absorb, the news that's hard to absorb. Take it in. Let it exercise that muscle the way a runner exercises muscle, so they don't snap under stress. The heart has a chance then to become so supple, it will break open into a largeness rather than apart in the shards.

Since I have come down from that trail in the Arkansas woods, I've spent time pondering the little daily ways that I can make room for grief, for these little deaths, so I can keep my heart open and keep the pressure from building inside. I want to share those with you. I know you all also have your own wisdom to share.

First, I think we have to make time and space and spaciousness to actually feel our feelings and feel our bodies, to breathe, for that breath to move in and through us. We can't fill all of our empty spaces with content. Scrolling, social media, the news, TV, audiobooks, talking, doing, doing, doing. We can't fill it all with other things. We have to have a little room. We've got to protect that space.

Next, I think we also sometimes need practices to help us work through those feelings and emotions. Some of those emotions are really stubborn. They like to get lodged in our bodies. But

just like what Sarah led us through this morning, singing, moving, dancing, drumming, art, exercise, if it doesn't become a distraction, those kinds of things can help us release a little bit of that tension that we feel.

The third thing is really having a sacred, supportive community, a sacred container for all of this. That might be a small group. Some of you are in wisdom circles, and I see this happening within those wisdom circles. I think this community, I hope this community, can be that for you. It's really disorienting to be attuned to the tragedy of what we're experiencing right now, of people being disappeared, of troops being sent to our cities, of any number of things. But it's really disorienting to be aware of that and walk through this world feeling that the people around you aren't aware, like at work or the grocery store. Are you not paying attention? It feels strange.

I think we need places where we can come, and talk to people who see it, too. Parker Palmer said,

The most trustworthy people in my life are people who have known broken-heartedness who've known it at depth. Those are the people I can go to and tell it the way it really is. And in that process, experience healing. They don't have answers for me anymore than I have answers for them. But we have a conversation rooted in broken-heartedness and honesty about the experience that goes somewhere humanly right.

That's what we're hoping to do here, have honest conversations. We make space. We preserve space. We engage in these practices that help us be in touch with these different dimensions of our experience. We have a community to hold all of that heartbreaking work. What can you do to exercise your heart just a little bit? How can we help each other? I've been focusing on the heartbreak piece of this, the hard things, the difficulty of living in the tragic gap. But there is beauty and there is joy, and profound love also.

I want to begin to close by sharing a meditation from Howard Thurman. For those of you who aren't familiar with Howard Thurman, he was a professor. He was a spiritual advisor to Martin Luther King Jr. and others in the civil rights movement. He went in 1936 to India and met with Gandhi, and he was very influenced by what he heard from Gandhi. He really can be credited with bringing nonviolence into the civil rights movement. This is a meditation he wrote in the mid '50s.

During these turbulent times, we must remind ourselves repeatedly that life goes on. This we are apt to forget. The wisdom of life transcends our wisdoms. The purpose of life outlasts our purposes. The process of life cushions our processes. The mass attack of disillusion and despair distilled out of the collapse of hope has so invaded our thoughts that what we know to be true and valid seems unreal and ephemeral. There seems to be little energy left for aught but futility. This is the great deception. Many people have gone down to oblivion without the will to affirm the great and permanent strength of the clean and the common place. Let us not be deceived. It is just as important as ever to attend to the little graces by which the dignity of our lives is maintained and sustained. Birds still sing. The stars continue to cast their gentle gleam over the desolation of the battlefields, and the heart is still inspired by the kind word and the gracious deed. To drink in the beauty that is within reach, to clothe one's life with simple deeds of kindness, to keep alive a sensitiveness to the movement of the spirit of God in the quietness of the human

heart and in the workings of the human mind. This is, as always, the ultimate answer to the great deception.

We live within a tragic landscape. This is a place of broken hearts. It's also a place of joy and profound love. We get to choose how we want to live within this tragic gap. The good news is we do not walk alone. We have help, and we have each other. Little graces, little deaths, little acts of kindness, birds still singing, hearts with greater room for love.

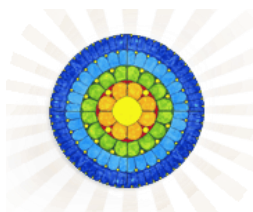
I invite you to your own reflections on these words.

Benediction

Rev. Carol Johnson

When you feel like groaning, know that it is okay. Know also that you are never alone. You can let your heart break into largeness so the beauty and joy can come in. May you find a community, either this community or elsewhere, where you can safely do that. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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