

Words Fail, Love Wins

Romans 8: 18 – 39

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Have you ever had a moment when words fail you? It may be something beautiful, so deeply touching that you had a speechless moment when the right words to describe the event were just not there. Words might've failed at the birth of your son or daughter, your first kiss, or the moment when you first saw your spouse. Words might've failed on the vacation you took to the Grand Canyon and you stood on the precipice for the first time and it took your breath away. It might've been when you witnessed the cascade of Niagara Falls for the first time. Words can fail us when the beauty and the grandeur of the moment seem so vastly superior to whatever you do to describe it. Even the photos or the selfies that we snap don't do them justice. Words fail....

Then there are other moments when words fail that aren't so good. The event causes you to feel numb and the grief, sadness, or anxiety is so real that it socks you in the gut. Unable to catch your breath, you are just trying to get through it. Words fail....

Words can be limiting. I might tell you the word "table" and you may have in your mind a rectangle, Formica covered, chrome legs and trim, and vinyl covered chairs. Or you might be thinking of that round table you grew up with that was made of oak with all of the grooves cut into it from countless meals and homework assignments. "Table" means many things to many people. Just using the word "table" is not nearly enough. Words fail....

The limitation of words to communicate reminds us that sometimes we are powerless to choose the right one to express how we are feeling or what we are thinking. Sometimes the experience takes time to process. In my mind I can picture an experience as if it had just happened. I replay it in my mind and think about what I actually said and slap myself in the head because now, given distance and perspective that comes with time, I know how I should have responded or what I should've said. The perfect word becomes obvious and I wish I had a do-over button that would bring me back in time and relive the moment and say the right word. Words fail....

I remember when my nephew Michael died. It was two years ago this past August and he was severely injured during a diving accident. He came up out of the ocean and was waiting to be picked up by the diving boat. Somehow, freakishly, while he waited he breathed in some water. He pulled himself into the boat alright and sat down. He then

found it hard to breath, passed out, and according to the doctor who was fortunately diving with him that day, Mikey then went into cardiac arrest. The doctor immediately started CPR and tried to resuscitate him. While he was able to restore his heart beat, Mikey never regained consciousness.

The extended family gathered to be with Mikey and his immediate family. We spent hours reading to him and talking with him and rubbing his hands and feet. For a week we waited until the doctors could do a brain flow test to see if he had any function in his brain. That day came, and they did the test. While we waited for the results, my wife Shelly and I went into the room to read Mikey his favorite book, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. While we were reading, my brother and his wife walked into the room. All I had to do was look at them and I knew that they had received the report from the doctor and the results weren't good. I hugged my brother and we cried together, feeling numb at the moment. Then I walked out into the waiting room and my son – my 230-pound football player – came to me and put his head in the crook of my neck and sobbed. Words failed....

I am glad at moments like that that there are groans which God can decipher. God knows that all of the creation has been in labor. We know the pain, the travail, the sweat, the blood of what goes on in childbirth. According to Romans, that is where we are at the present time. We don't know the joy of the release that comes when the baby is born, we're in the between-time when the struggle to give birth is real and the groans are all that escape our mouths.

God knows that as humans our lives can change in a heartbeat. One moment we can be on the top of the world at the height of our game. Everything seems to be going our way and one success leads to another. But then the doctor delivers the test results and it floors you. He uses words like cancer, stroke, heart disease, or aneurysm. The world shifts under your feet and you know, you just know, that words fail....

Maybe that's as is should be now. At moments like those it is important to realize that words fail, not because we don't have to have the right words to express our thoughts. No, it's not that we are simply at a loss for words, or too immature to express the right word, or that we are not wise enough to know a phrase to fill the silence. No, at moments like those, the right words just don't exist. All we can do at moments like those is groan and tears become the only response that makes sense. Words fail....

But according to Romans, somehow the desire to communicate must give way to the desire to trust in the relationship and find love in the silence. We need to know that there is a God who undergirds all of our experiences. Because this God is with us, beyond the suffering of the present moment lays a hopeful love that is so much larger than we can possibly comprehend. The miracle is that according to Romans, when words fail, love wins.

“What can separate us from the love of God?” is the question on the lips of the writer. Then he gives us a whole bunch of one word answers: trouble, hardship, persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword. Then the writer pretends that the questions are merely rhetorical and gives us the apparent one word answer. No, and then pens these words, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” In short, he wants us to know that love wins.

Love wins when words fail us. Can cancer separate us from the love of God? Can the death of children separate us from the love of God? Can the loss of our health or the development of chronic disease? Can divorce separate us from the love of God? Can the loss of our job or long-term unemployment? Can chronic mental health issues separate us from the love of God? Can the foreclosure of a house? Can the loss of clout or being fired from a job? What is the worst word that you can think of, what is the one thing that you don't think you could ever survive? Think it right now. What is it? Can that word and the experience it represents separate you from the love of God?

The answer is No. Why? Because love wins! Love wins because it is the foundation upon which the world turns. We may think that money makes the world go round but we would be wrong. We may think that power makes the world go round. We might think that oil is the answer to our problems. Health, wealth, fortune and fame all give us temporary joys, but in the end their promise is only one word away from being turned upside down. Can an economic downturn separate us from the love of God? Can it? No, it can't because we know that love wins.

Here is the good news. You are loved by a love that is so immeasurable and intense and incomprehensible that words will fail to describe it. When words fail us, God's love will see us through. Love wins.

Gordon Cosby, the founding pastor of the Church of the Savior, writes: “In the struggle to become Christ's Body, we have but one weapon and one alone: Love. Any other weapon betrays the cause. We are not allowed demanding, controlling power. We are not given the power to fix things: no violence, no hatred, just love.

“We have to love. We have to love those who pervert our message and even kill us. We have to love God's possibility alive in each one, even within the enemy. We have to love the beauty that is captured in each person. Only love: love, love, love, scandalous love. Love like that of the Lamb slain from the foundations of the world. Love is what first softened your heart and mine. Love brought us into the struggle to live. Love alone has the power to break hearts open so that we will all lay down our defenses and join in the

cosmic movement toward a new heaven, a new earth, in a Holy City whose foundation is Love.” In short, Gordon Cosby wants us to know that Love wins....

The picture of God’s love that I have in my mind comes from a book. That book is *Mortal Lessons* written by Dr. Richard Selzer. In this passage he describes an interaction between a young husband and his wife. He writes: “I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be like this from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve. “Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks. “Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks. “Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.” She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. “I like it,” he says, “it is kind of cute.” “All at once I know who he is. I understand and lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.”

For better or worse, God’s love will stick with us. Like the young husband who kisses his wife’s lips to prove that his love will not fail, God’s love sticks with us. Though our lips are twisted with pain, though our lips will never be the same again, though life has dealt us a low blow and we fail to have the words to express how we feel, God’s love will stick with us.

God was with us when we were born. God was with us when we were baptized. God was with us when we were confirmed. God was with us when we were married. God was with us when our children were born. God was with us when we were sick. God was with us when we got the news we didn’t want to hear. God was with us when we cried and words failed us. God was with us when our pride was hurt and we failed to love each other as we should. God was with us in the best of times and in the worst of times. God was with us in the greatest accomplishments of our lives and when we took a risk and failed. God was with us then, God is with us now, and God will be with us when we, one day, pass through death's door into eternal love and joy. We must trust in that loving presence and know that when words fail, love wins. It always will because love is stronger than death. Thanks be to God.