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Sermon Series: *Not Business as Usual, No. 10*

**A Groaning World**

June 28, 2020

*Romans 8:18-27*

The Apostle Paul writes:

<sup>18</sup> *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*

<sup>19</sup> *For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.* <sup>20</sup> *For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope* <sup>21</sup> *that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*

<sup>22</sup> *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.* <sup>23</sup> *Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.* <sup>24</sup> *For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?* <sup>25</sup> *But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

<sup>26</sup> *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.* <sup>27</sup> *And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. [NIV]*

This is a passage that, maybe more accurately than any other in the Bible, describes what is going on, from a theological perspective, in our world.

Now, of course, you can get a description of all that's happening – in *human* terms, in *physical* or *earthly* terms – from the *news*. In fact, in our day, you can pretty much choose your news source based on your political or ideological leanings, which means you can receive exactly the description of what's going on that fits best with whatever you think.

That is one thing that is so frustrating about most so-called news – at least on the national level: it's become so market-driven that it's nearly impossible to separate the news from the commentary – commentary that panders to an individual's or an audiences' preferences and ideological leanings. So much news, anymore, isn't really meant to inform as much as it's meant to provoke, which is what gets ratings, which draws advertisers, which brings in revenue, which pays for ski trips and vacations homes for those who produce it.

You see how that works?

But it's not just the news.

Regarding this whole Covid thing in particular: I mentioned in an update to our Board of Administration this week, how, just last week, I watched two medical doctors – infectious disease doctors, in fact, and both with PhDs, teaching at different universities – say the exact opposite thing about the future of this virus and how we should be responding to it.

Now, I'm not in any way bashing doctors and medical people. They're human too and they have opinions, and especially so with something this new. I truly believe that, by far and away, most of them are trying to understand and give the right counsel.

But hearing these kinds of things just points out how different perspectives are on the human, physical, earthly realities of our world, and we have to wade through those the best we can.

But in the midst of the physical and earthly and human realities of our day, we have to remember that there is a theological reality at work here too, which is something we need to consider and comprehend in order to keep the human, physical parts of our world in right perspective.

And you can sum up the theological reality of what is going on in our world in one word: *groaning*.

Groaning.

Some of you will remember the Jerry Lee Lewis song from the mid-sixties, "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On."

Well, in our world today, you might sing, instead, "Whole lotta groanin' goin' on."

You can skip the, "C'mon baby!" if you want to.

But the fact is – there is a whole lot of groaning going on.

And we all know what groaning is, right?

For one thing, it's *onomatopoeia*: when a word's sound imitates the action it stands for – like flash or splash or bang. The word "groaning" sounds like what it is.

That's onomatopoeia – and to tell you the truth, I've always wanted to put that word into a sermon, but this is the first time I've ever been able to do it.

I just think that's such a cool word – onomatopoeia.

So groaning is that, but what is it, substantially?

Well, you hear groaning when someone tells a truly bad joke or pun. What do you say in response? There's nothing really to say; you just go, "uggghhhh." That expression, that sound, is a way to express your feeling that, "Oh, that was awful – that was painful. There isn't more of that to come is there, because it's not enjoyable?"

That is groaning, and the truth is, the older we get, the more familiar with it we probably become.

This summer, Annette has been washing the high, white trim around the outside of our house. It gets grimy over time—especially on the north side of the house. Have you noticed that?

If you don't have much sunshine hitting the north side of your house, all sorts of stuff starts growing on the walls there—on those north walls. They get all green.

There's a house in town here—I won't tell you which one—that just about has a garden growing up its north side. It's supposed to be white siding, but it's just about all green.

We've been trying to keep on top of that, so she's been washing the white fascia and soffit and dentil molding and gutters around the roofline of our house, and I'm painting it where it's needed.

We've been doing that for a couple weeks when we have time, and we noticed on several of these past mornings that we both have woken up—groaning. We have sore arms, sore shoulders, and stiff necks—not the biblical kind, just the real, you know, stiff necks. Initially we thought we must have slept wrong or something, or maybe this mattress isn't any good. But we finally put it together: it's all that scrubbing and scraping and painting over our heads—that we have never done before—at our age—ahem, and we're thinking that's causing the groaning.

OK, but what is groaning?

Well, as you know, groaning doesn't typically come from those sharp, severe, overwhelming sorts of pains that attack you, right? Groaning is not how you respond, at least not initially, to a stab wound or a broken arm or something like that. That would cause more of a shrieking or screaming.

Groaning is not like that.

Groaning is more of an aching—more of a dull but consistent chronic pain or irritation that just keeps going. It doesn't overwhelm you in the moment, but it's with you all day long. It's always there, reminding you that, well, in my and Annette's case, we're not as young as we used to be, and so our bodies don't respond to things, or recover from things that we do with them or to them, as quickly as they used to do.

The groaning is our response to the fact that something has changed here and unfortunately not for the better.

And that is the exact thing Paul is trying to explain to those Christians at Rome.

Something has changed here and not for the better.

Among the believers in Rome, there was "a whole lotta groanin' going on," because there was a whole lotta sufferin' goin' on. He says that first thing in verse 18.

The interesting thing about the suffering in Rome, though, is that—if you notice the sorts of things Paul addresses in Romans—what you see is that a fair amount of the suffering that the Christians were experiencing there was not really due to Roman governmental persecution, or really any other sort of persecution from without as one might expect.

Now sure, there were local outbreaks of persecution here and there, but generally—at least initially, Rome was pretty tolerant about religion.

The issues Paul addresses here in Romans, though, are more about the sufferings that were arising from divisions that were growing up within the church, primarily between Christians from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds.

And based on the words—the content that Paul writes to diffuse them, the divisions and differences were not primarily ethnic. They were theological more than anything else.

Those from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds held pretty different convictions about things like Covenant, the place of the Mosaic Law, the definitions of righteousness, and even some of the nuances regarding salvation—how it was defined and what, exactly, it meant. Things like that.

How would these Christians who were sincere followers of Christ but from very different backgrounds and with different views of such things, how would they be able to get along?

That was the issue—the problem—and so that is the question Paul was trying to answer here, and he begins his answer by explaining why such differences, and the discord they produce, exist in the first place.

And it all has to do with groaning.

Now in the first seven chapters of Romans, Paul invests a lot of time in describing the benefits of salvation and redemption that believers already enjoy here on earth.

But beginning here in Chapter 8, verse 18, Paul's focus turns to the benefits of redemption that are *yet to come*. He talks about those rewards of salvation that are not yet realized.

And what's holding them back?

Again, it comes down to this groaning that's going on.

He explains there in verse 20. "You see," Paul says, "the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope."

The creation—the created order, everything that is—is not as it was created to be. As that famous theologian, Daffy Duck, once said, "There's something's amiss here."

The world is not as God intended it to be, and you can trace that clear back to the Garden of Eden—Genesis 3, when God placed the curse on the ground as a result of human sin. Ever since then, the way the world works has been different. Limited. Frustrated. You see, the sun wants to shine, but sometimes it can't. The rain wants to fall, but sometimes it can't. The earth wants to produce—but sometimes it can't.

It all wants to do what it was created to do, but because of the fall, sometimes it can't.

And the word "frustrating" is a good translation of how this expresses itself. It's frustrating when you want to do something—and especially the very thing you were created to do, but for one reason or another, you simply can't.

Personally, I want to see perfectly, as I was created to see, but due to a variety of things, I just can't.

Some of you want to hear as you were created to hear, but you just can't.

Some of us want to grow hair, as we were created to grow it, but we just can't.

Some want to walk, run, jump, sleep as we were created to, but for this or that reason, we just can't.

And that frustration that we feel when we run up against our limitations, that's often a big part of what makes us groan.

Verse 23 there, Paul writes, "*We ourselves, even we who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly...*"

We know what we were made to be. We have even experienced the salvation of Christ and the presence of God's Spirit within us. And yet even with all this, we still find ourselves groaning with our limitations.

Even knowing Christ—even possessing God's Spirit, we still hit walls in this world, which reminds us that, while salvation and deliverance may well be complete on the spiritual level, on the *physical* level, on the *environmental* level, on the *political* and *relational* and *earthly* levels, salvation is not yet complete.

And so, we groan.

And just as we groan because we're still broken and incomplete—just as we groan about those things, so the whole world groans. The whole earth—the whole creation—feels that way too.

In verse 22 there, Paul says, "*... the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*"

Now, let me say that as best I can understand as a man—and you women will correct me, as I know you will—this may not be the very best simile, because the pain of childbirth, at least as I've noticed it in, um, others, the pain of childbirth is more than groaning! It's more than that dull, aching, chronic sort of thing I described before.

It's actually more the stabbing, acute sort of pain. So, the comparison might break down a little.

But we can give Paul a break—he was a man, after all.

But you see, Paul uses this simile of childbirth because he is ultimately trying to get across not so much a description of the pain, but the results of the pain.

You see the pain—the groaning that we experience in this time—is not destined to go on forever. In fact, Paul's greater point in this passage is that the groaning of the moment is leading to a reward—a liberation—a redemption—a glory! Paul uses all those words. That will make the present groaning seem like nothing by comparison.

Back, again, to verse 18. Paul lays it out right away, "I consider..."

Actually, that word "consider" there is better translated as "reckon." And yes, that's the same word that you used to hear—not so much anymore, but you used to hear people use it—like, "Well, I reckon that's a pretty good deal," or "I reckon I'll go on into town today."

In the context of a purchase, for example, it means: "I've done the research. I've thought about the pros and cons of buying, say, this truck. I see its condition, and I've considered the year and make and model and reliability and price. And, all things considered, I reckon—I've decided—I believe—I've come to the conclusion that this is a pretty good deal."

That's what Paul means when he says, "I consider or I reckon that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed."

Just as when a baby is born after moments or hours or even days of painful labor, as soon as you see the baby, you realize the pain of the birth was worth it, so the beauty and glory and reward and redemption to come—the resolution of all that is broken—are worth the pain and the groaning of the days spent waiting for it.

That's what Paul is assuring the Roman Christians of.

Yes, there are difficult times. There are interpersonal conflicts, there are misunderstandings, there are theological disagreements, even among believers.

Why? Because all of creation isn't as it was created to be—because of the fall.

Because of the fall, everything and everyone around us is not quite right. Imperfect. Unable to understand completely. Unable to discern perfectly. Unable to communicate thoroughly. We misunderstand. We make mistakes. Mistakes in judgement. Mistakes in relationships. Mistakes in assessments. Mistakes in tone.

We all do it. Even when our intentions are completely good, sometimes we make those kinds of mistakes and we're not even aware of it. We hurt other people without being aware of it. We offend others by accident, and we take offense when we shouldn't.

You see, it's all a part of what's amiss here.

It's all a part of the groaning.

And the creation itself does it too.

A thistle grows in our garden where we have planted vegetables, and as we're picking our squash we grab the thistle and it hurts our hand. The earth has offended us, but not intentionally. The earth intended to grow squash there, not thistles. But thistles are part of the fall. It's all part of the groaning of a broken world.

We're all groaning. Whether we realize it or not, we're all groaning under this weight. This frustration.

The virus itself is part of the groaning.

The inability to respond to it decisively is part of the groaning.

The racial tensions are part of the groaning.

And the ways we respond to these things—the anger and rage, the arrogance and apathy, the misunderstanding and lack of compassion that spills out of our frustration, it's all part of the groaning.

We were made for better things—a better world.

A world where things like these don't exist, you see?

For now, the world is groaning due to frustration.

But Paul says, that better world is coming – for those who follow Jesus. That is the thread of hope that weaves all through this description here.

And that world is so, so, worth it! We will enjoy that redeemed world. And the earth itself will be free to enjoy that redemption – that reality where all that is on edge will be set in order.

All that is not quite right will slip into perfect place.

All that is amiss will be made whole and right.

Communication will be clear.

Discernment will be accurate.

Understanding will be complete.

Relationships will be restored.

Truth will be known – and known by all.

No more guessing. No more offending. No more presumption.

No injustice. No arrogance. No pride.

No more frustration.

No more groaning.

For now, to one degree or another, we all groan.

But one day, when Christ returns and redemption of this world is complete – on that day, we will not groan. We will sing.

So even in the midst of groaning, Paul says, keep your eyes on that day to come. Don't lose hope. Don't give in to the groaning – to the way the world is presently. Don't presume that what is is all that will ever be. Wait patiently for what's to come.

And know that, even now, God's Spirit is helping us. Paul says even God's Spirit is groaning, too – there in verse 26. He's groaning with us and for us, on our behalf before God the Father. He feels our frustration, but He is also helping us overcome it and keep our eyes focused beyond it.

Beyond the groaning – to the place of song.

Just as Paul's world was amiss, so is our world amiss – and in many ways a mess. And it spills over into nearly every detail of life.

But redemption – complete redemption – is coming to all who follow Jesus. Keep that hope ever before you. Stay true to Him. Follow Him through the frustration, through the groaning – all the way to glory – all the way home.

Prayer:

Father, as we navigate these not-business-as-usual days, help us to see our world not just practically and humanly, but help us to see our days and times theologically so we can make right decisions, so we can give and receive grace from one another, and so the hope for the new world to come is never far from our thoughts.

Closing Song: *What a Day That Will Be*

Benediction:

Someone once told me, and I've confirmed this with some of our musicians here, that most of the sounds our world makes – like when the wind blows through the trees or the waves crash on the ocean's shore, those sounds are in minor keys.

Now there's nothing wrong with minor keys, but our sensibilities – even for those who don't know anything about music, like me – our sensibilities, when we hear minor keys, don't want them to end a thing.

If we hear a song that is in a minor key, there is a place for that in music. But we naturally want it to resolve itself – to end in a major key. It seems that there is something not quite complete until resolution to a major key happens.

Maybe even through the sounds of nature, our world is telling us of its groaning.

But the day of resolution – when the frustration and groaning of our world is replaced by redemption and healing and freedom, that day is coming. Jesus is bringing it with Him when He comes to reign. So in Jesus' name, and in the power of His Spirit, let us live and offer that sure hope to our groaning world.