One of the most special gifts of being on retreat is that it gives us space to listen deeply. In the silence and the solitude we are able to slow down, quieten ourselves, and hear those things we so often don’t hear. While the primary way to listen on retreat is usually through a meditation on the Scriptures, I want to complement this traditional emphasis with another kind of listening. Retreat, I would like to suggest, is also a time to “listen to the groans.”

In order for us to explore what it may mean on retreat to listen to the groans, I want to look at Paul’s remarkable passage to the Romans in chapter 8:22–27. These verses come midway between two other popular biblical passages. At the beginning of the eighth chapter there is a wonderful verse, a favorite of evangelicals, declaring that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. At the end of the chapter there is the magnificent statement, a favorite of universalists, that neither death nor life, nor anything else in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The passage about the groans falls between these two statements. There is no shortcut from the first part of the chapter to the last part. We cannot bypass the groans—especially when we are on retreat. For as New Testament scholar Tom Wright has pointed out,
verses 22–27 are the means by which these two great affirmations are grounded in theological and practical reality. Retractants need to heed these words. Otherwise it is very easy for our retreat experience to become otherworldly, abstract, and irrelevant to the world in which we are called to live out our faith.

These verses tell us that three voices are groaning at the same time. They groan all around us as well as within us all the time. If we listen deeply, we can hear each one. These voices together help us find our way into God’s purposes for our lives. As we listen to these groans, we are drawn into a deeper faithfulness, both in our personal discipleship and in our life together as God’s people. Most importantly, when we listen to these groans, we begin to have a much clearer understanding of how we can participate in God’s healing dream for the mending of our broken world.

It is easy for this to happen. I remember being taught, soon after my conversion as a teenager, songs that encouraged me to view the world as an enemy to the saving work of Christ. I sang, “The world behind me, the Cross before me.” Yet the cross is in the world. Christ gets crucified there, before our eyes and our ears, every day of our lives. Did he not say, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40)?

Another song I sang went like this: “Turn your eyes upon Jesus; look full in his wonderful face, and the things of the earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.” Although I think I can understand what the songwriter intended by this, I have found that the things of the world grow strangely clear in the light of Jesus Christ. Surely, since Jesus Christ is the light of the world, we can see its beauty and pain even more clearly and hear its laughter and cries more deeply. When we open our hearts and minds to Jesus in our moments of retreat, we are drawn more deeply into the world that he loves so much and for which he died.

Songs like these often betray God’s fierce love for the healing of the whole world. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). Paul knew this, and so his concerns were always cosmic in scale. This also needs to be part of our awareness when we retreat to be with God in silence. We must know that God’s loving arms wrap around the globe and embrace every human being. They embrace every aspect of what it means to be human—the worlds of art, music, finance, economics, education, medicine, politics, and sport. God’s arms embrace the trees, mountains, forests, rivers, and every other living thing. God longs to put the whole world right. As Hans Küng has written, “God’s kingdom is creation healed.”

Now, if our retreat experience is going to help us play our part in God’s story of mending our world, we need to hear in the silence the groans around us. This is what happened to Desmond Tutu when he was on retreat in 1976. In May 1976 Desmond Tutu went on a five-day silent retreat. According to his biographer, John Allen, he entered the retreat with his emotions in turmoil. While sitting in his cell-like retreat room, the groans of the oppressed pierced his heart. He felt himself called to write immediately to the president of South Africa, John Vorster. “I felt this pressure. I had to do this, and just sat at my desk. The letter more or less wrote itself.”
In the letter he pleaded for the president to do something “because I have a growing nightmarish fear that unless something drastic is done very soon, then bloodshed and violence are going to happen in South Africa almost inevitably.” Tutu’s letter was dismissed out of hand. As we all know, one month later, the Soweto uprising exploded. In the ten months following June 16, at least 660 people were killed, most of them under the age of 24.

Retreat is a time for us to listen to the groans around us. In the silence we can begin to think and reflect on questions like these: What are the human cries that surround me at home? at work? in the community? To which one is God calling me to respond? Which are those that frighten me and from which I want to flee? What is God saying to me through these cries? Questions like these can often deepen our capacity to listen and to respond to the groans in our midst.

We Groan

Second, when we are on retreat, we can listen more deeply to our own groans. In verse 23, Paul vividly captures the tension in which we as followers of Christ live. “Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly” (Romans 8:23). On the one hand, we experience the joy of the Spirit at work in our lives, the joy of being called God’s beloved children, the joy of knowing that our sins have been forgiven, the joy of being bonded together with brothers and sisters in the faith from every tribe and nation and tongue, the joy of knowing that we are living an indestructible life with an eternal future in God’s great universe. Through his life, death, and resurrection Jesus has made all this possible, and we celebrate it joyfully. Yet, on the other hand, we who are part of God’s family also groan, and we need to listen and attend to our own groans. In 1978, I had the opportunity of working in a small, ecumenical, inner-city congregation in Washington called the Church of the Saviour. One day just before I came back to South Africa, I was having a cup of coffee with the pastor of this remarkable congregation, a man by the name of Gordon Cosby. I asked him a question I sometimes ask people I respect: “If you could say one thing to me, what would it be?” He was quiet for a few moments, and then he answered, “When you go back to South Africa and minister in your congregation, remember always that each person sits next to their own pool of tears.”

Retreat, I want to suggest, is a time to listen to these tears. In this respect another New Testament image speaks to me powerfully. It is the picture of the risen Christ coming to Mary as she weeps outside the empty tomb. He asks her, “Why are you crying?” Jesus’ question invites Mary and us, too, to face the story behind our tears. Like Mary we are invited to examine our pain, to put words to our sorrow, to allow our tears to find their voice. We could be crying for any number of reasons:

- I’m crying because I am missing my loved one so much.
- I’m crying because my marriage is in trouble and I cannot see a way forward.
- I’m crying because my divorce has ripped my life apart.
- I’m crying because I am in the dark and don’t know what to do.
- I’m crying because my body is in pain and I cannot seem to find relief.
- I’m crying because of the deep guilt I feel for something I did in the past.
- I’m crying because God seems so far away and I don’t know where to find him.

On our retreat we can share these tears with God. Many of the Psalms teach us to do this. They show us how to talk simply and honestly to God about the deep groanings of our hearts and lives. Too often we only think about our pain in God’s presence. We need to tell God about it. The Psalmist repeatedly encourages us to speak aloud to God about the painful things we are going through. Think for a moment about some of the sentences we come across when we read the Psalms, sentences like, “I cried out to the Lord”; “Hear my prayer, O Lord, listen to my cry for help”; “How long, O Lord, how long?”
The Spirit Groans

Last, when we are on retreat, we can also listen to the deepest groan of all, the groan of the Spirit. “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). The groan of God’s Spirit is the groan of intercession. Often we open ourselves to the groans of the world and our own, too; we come to the end of words. We do not even know sometimes how to pray. But the good news is that the Spirit of God takes the prayer of Jesus and prays it in our own depths.

There is a prayer meeting going on in our hearts 24/7. We are never prayerless! The Spirit is doing the praying we cannot do. God the Spirit, who shares in the groaning of creation and in our own, is calling out to God the creator, praying the prayer that resonates in Jesus’ own heart for the healing of the whole world. There is always, as Tom Wright reminds us again, a deeply Trinitarian shape to Christian prayer.

Retreat is a time for us to listen deeply to the groaning of the Spirit who intercedes for us right here, right now. We do not need to get too mystical about this. We are not clueless about what the Spirit may be praying. We know that the Spirit does not talk on the Spirit’s own authority. Rather, the Spirit takes the prayer of Jesus and prays it deep within us. It is the prayer for the coming of God’s kingdom, a prayer for God’s will to be done, a prayer for heaven to come to earth, a prayer for the mending of our broken world.

There was a certain monk who was, to an extraordinary degree, a man of prayer, someone absolutely carried away by prayer, which was his constant occupation. He was asked once how he had reached that state. He replied that he found it hard to explain. “Looking back,” he said, “my impression is that for many, many years I was carrying prayer within my heart, but did not know it at the time. It was like a spring, but one covered by a stone. Then at a certain moment Jesus took the stone away. At that moment, the spring began to flow and has been flowing ever since.” On retreat we ask Jesus to take away the stone from our hearts, so that the prayer which lies there like a hidden spring may begin to overflow throughout our lives and our congregations and our ministries and throughout God’s world.

Responding to the Groans

Once we listen to the groans, we will want to respond. Retreat experiences often water our desires to participate in some practical way in God’s dream for a healed world. But where do we begin? Very simply, we can ask God, “Which groan has my name written on it?” This is what all the great Christ-followers have done—people like Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu, and others—they have sought to discern their own particular call to live out some little piece of God’s dream within God’s world. On retreat we can also do this. Such a question, when accompanied by wrestling prayer and planned action, always carries forward God’s dream in our midst. Ultimately, we always retreat in order to advance God’s purposes in the world.

ENDNOTES
1 Some of the material in this article has been explored more deeply in my booklet Listening to the Groans: A Spirituality for Ministry and Mission, published by Upper Room Books, 2007.
3 Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized Edition.
8 Wright, 76.

About the Author

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