

Sighs

Romans 8: 26 – 34

Makemie Presbyterian Church

September 30, 2007

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.

Those whom God predestined God also called; & those whom God called he also justified; & those whom God justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? God who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will God with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

This ends the reading of scripture lesson this morning.

I was in a distant city, and the seminar in which I was involved ended on Saturday at lunch. Our host had insisted if we could, if it was possible in any way to stay over on Sunday, it would help the budget because the airlines gave a big break if you stayed over Saturday night. I could and did, but the little motel where I was housed didn't seem to be in a church district. I asked at the counter on Sunday morning,

“Is there a church near here to which I could walk?”

After a little huddle behind the counter they said,

“Well, there's one about three or four blocks down this way,”

pointing in one direction.

I said, “Do you know what kind it is?”

They said, “No we don't know.”

I said, “That's okay.”

So I walked and I went in. It was a small building, modestly built, one of those that looks like the men of the church helped build it, because they seemed to love it very much. It was warm & Friendly, not elaborate at all for worship. I took my seat, a bit early, but it soon began to fill up and soon was totally filled. I would say there were

about 120 people. At the appointed hour, the choir came down.

Following the choir came the minister, in this case, a man.

I was absolutely shocked. He was very tall – I suppose he was about 6'5" or so. He was also very large, maybe 290 or 310 pounds. but his most noticeable feature was his stumbling lumbering gait. He was awkward, almost falling, with his long useless arms at his sides, like they were awaiting further instruction. Sort of T-Rex arms. His head was misshapen, his hair was askew. He stumbled up the three or four steps to get to the pulpit. When he turned to face us, I saw the thick glasses, and through them I could see the milky film over his eyes, one of his eyes going out, nothing coming in to the other. When he read he held the book near his nose. When he spoke, the sinews of his neck worked with such vigor as he pushed out the words, it was as if he had learned to speak as an adult. But I lost all consciousness of that after a while. He read Romans 8, "God who searches the heart," and he read, "the firstborn in a large family." It was an unusual thing. If you had a copy of his sermon, you would said, "I'd give it a grade of `C.'" It was not poetic, it was not prophetic, it was pastoral. It was so warm and so full of love and affection. It was firm, and it had exhortation in it. But the relationship between those people, the love

that he extended as he preached, and the love that came back from those people who sat quietly, learning forward, was captivating, and I was captured. What is this? How could this grotesque creature be so full of love? I didn't understand. I started remembering things that I shouldn't have remembered – all those stories about how people who have grotesque features sometimes are granted a special quality of affection. *Beauty and the Beast* or Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, so ugly and yet so beautiful in his love and capacity for affection. I thought of children with Down's Syndrome, how they have the capacity to love and grab you and hug you and kiss you, when other children stand at a distance. Is this what I'm seeing here? The providence of God that grants people who lack attractiveness on the outside to have that quality on the inside?

I wanted to get acquainted with this extraordinary preacher, so I lingered near the door hoping to invite him to lunch. HE couldn't go, but as I stood at the door and observed the greetings and hellos and little words of pastoral care, comfort, and respect between him and the members, one woman I would guess to be seventy shook his hand at the door. She spoke with him, and said this:

“I wish I could know your mother.”

I saw her having the same trouble as I was. She didn't understand the source of this and thought maybe, *I wish I knew your mother.*

He said, "My mother's name is Grace."

When everybody had left and I began to visit with him, we sat on a back pew for a few minutes, and I said, "That was an unusual response you gave to that woman, 'My mother's name is Grace.'"

And he said, "It is? When I was born," he said, "I was put up for adoption at the Department of Family Services. But as you can see, nobody wanted to adopt me. So I went from foster home to foster home, and when I was about sixteen or seventeen, I saw some young people going into a church. I wanted to be with young people, so I went in, and there I met grace – the grace of God."

We when seek God's grace, Saint Paul's very good news is we have not one but two intercessors in the kingdom of God: the Holy Spirit, who teaches us how to pray, & Christ himself, who sits on the right hand of God. When we seek God's presence, Paul says, both of them stand ready to assure the ruler of the universe of our sincerity & good intentions. It's awesome good news to have two advocates of such magnificence, but most of us don't take full advantage of them.

Maybe it's because we don't know how, maybe we are restricted or govern by other rules or considerations. I remember a church I served as a student. They had a fund called the Emergency Fund and had about \$1000 in it. They told me I could use it at my discretion, provided I dispensed the money according to the conditions. So I said, "What are the conditions?"

The chair of the committee said, "You are not to give the money to anybody who is in need as a result of laziness, drunkenness, or poor management."

I said, "Well, what else is there?"

Far as I know they still have the money.

Maybe it's because we do not know how to pray, at least that what Paul tells us. We don't know how, or what, or why, and so consequently we are likely to avoid prayer all together because we would rather not pray at all than do it wrong. God already knows what we ask before we ask it, right? And God knows better than we what we need, right? Half the things on our prayer list seem too trivial to bring up, and the rest too weighty. We don't want to test God; we don't want to manipulate God even if we could, & so we tie ourselves in knots before we ever begin, & we may put off beginning. We may

in fact choose to remain silent before God rather than assault his majesty with our babble. It's an understandable idea – humble & all that – but it is a little like refusing to make any friends because you are not sure what to say to them.

Talking is only part of prayer. We talk to unburden our hearts, to come clean before God; we talk to hear ourselves talk, to listen to how we present ourselves to our Maker, and quite often our prayers change even as we pray them. We realize we don't want what we thought we wanted, or it occurs to us to pray for something else all together. Or we pray for someone we do not even like. These changes are evidence of the Holy Spirit at work, Paul says, teaching us how to pray. But it is when we are finished talking that our prayers begin in earnest, because that is when we begin to listen. When all of our words run out, when we are scraping the bottom of our verbal barrels and all that is left are some inarticulate longings, some hungers beyond expression, that is when the Holy Spirit really gets to work, bearing those pieces of our souls to God in a way that makes divine sense & returning to us with good news that may be equally inarticulate, equally beyond expression. But if we are listening we

cannot fail to hear it, & be changed by it, & reassured that even when we do not know how to pray our prayers make their way to God,

When I was at seminary, some of us would use the campus library as an office of sorts. In the big reading room with the volumes we weren't allowed to check out and take home, there were 20 or so big tables of polished mahogany that had eight leather chairs around each one. I was at seminary with many talented classmates, who were interrupting their careers to answer this call God had placed to them, there was, let's see, an orthopedic surgeon who looked over bumps, sprains, bruises, minor complaints on Wednesdays from 3 – 5 p.m. Free medical advice. He would say, "The advice is as good as what you all are paying."

A judge who on Tuesdays from 10 – 11:20 a.m. would sort out legal issues, parking tickets, do not rescuitate orders, living wills, etc. I would help with editing, or marketing campaigns on Monday evenings after supper. Many nights it was just a night for reading and studying. After all by the time you get to graduate school you can pretty much put together a sentence and ten years ago, marketing was not something churches really considered. I was sitting one night reading Barth's *Letters to the Romans*, when a woman asked for me

to come out to the parking lot, I was a little nervous, but I followed her to the parking lot and to her car. She opened the back door, and slumped in the back seat was her brother. He had been a senior at the University of Texas. He had been in a bad car wreck and in a coma eight months. She had quit her job as a school teacher to take care of him. All of their resources were gone. She opened the door and said, "I'd like for you to heal him."

I said, "I can pray for him. And I can pray with you. But I don't have the gift of healing."

She got behind the wheel and said to me, "Then what in the world do you do?" And she drove off. What I did that evening was study, stare at my books, and try to forget what she had said.

And then I prayed for God to reveal his purpose for me, to point me in the right direction, to give me a sign. It was a pretty good prayer, as formal prayers go, but I didn't hear or feel any answers. So I tried again, getting madder and madder as I did. What good was God if he couldn't answer a simple prayer? I talked and talked at God until the words ran out, and then to my great surprise I heard myself begin to sing – or chant really, something between a plainsong and the howl of a dog answering a siren.

No words came out, just mournful sounds that seemed finally to say what was on my heart, and when I came to the end of them I had my answer. It was nothing specific, which is what I had wanted. I had expected a direction, like, “Stand on one foot and touch your left hand to your right ear.”

But the answer I got was the deep conviction that I was loved, and what I was called to do was to love back in whatever way allowed me to love the best and the most – as a housewife and mother, as an orthopedic surgeon, or as a judge, or as a former school teacher, or as an ordained minister – the specifics don’t seem to matter to God. What matters are our relationships, and the love in them, chief among which is our relationship with God. Saint Augustine summed it up 1600 years ago: “Love, and do what you will.”

That sort of answer doesn’t sit well with most of us. It is a frightening world out there, with a thousand possibilities for doing good or evil, and we want more certainty than that. We want the definitive word. We want specific instructions and clear guidelines for what is acceptable and what is unacceptable behavior before God. We want to be rescued from our freedom, and we burn rubber seeking a simplicity that simply does not exist. The vehicle most of us

use in this search is the Bible. I have been surprised by how many people have come to ask me what the Bible says about this romantic predicament or that job offer or their quarrel with a friend. Some of them want to know if they should let the Bible fall open at will or close their eyes and point to a passage for the answer to their question, which reminds me a little of reading tea leaves or consulting the I Ching.

Let me hasten to add the motives of these people are entirely honorable. They are seeking the will of God for their lives, but what surprises me is their willingness to put the answers they find in the Bible on a pedestal above the answers they find in their own minds and hearts, in the counsel of their friends, & in the world around them. To do so seems tantamount to saying that the Holy Spirit has ceased to function, that God can only speak to us in the word he used thousands of years ago, and that there is nothing new under the sun.

Before I go further, let me reaffirm the vow that all Presbyterian ministers make at their ordinations: I do believe the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary for salvation. That is true. It is true because, in addition to lots of laws, a few genealogies, and some sound advice,

what the Bible contains are many biographies. Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, Hosea and Habakkuk, John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph, Peter and Mary Magdalene, Nicodemus and Judas – it contains the stories of all their relationships with God and the particular things God had to say to each of them, how he loved each of them as his individual creation and not as a recruit in some faceless army.

What all of those stories tell us is that God's word, God's will for their lives, did not come to them in printed manual, with specific answers to be found on page 536, paragraph 5, line 14. God's will for them, which was God's love for them, came in the form of a living relationship that they were free to embrace or flee. What all of their stories combine to tell us is that God comes to us in the same way. God calls each of us into relationship. And while searching scripture may be the way we come to understand that, it may also be the way we miss the boat altogether.

Certainly we can learn from all those stories of the relationships God had with each of our mothers & fathers in the faith. But reading about their relationships cannot be a substitute for seeking our own. We are called to live out our own stories, to search for the unique

shape our own lives will take in communion with God, and find God's particular word to us. What does that mean, day to day? It means revering the Bible as the inspired word of God, but it also means revering the Christian tradition as the place that word has been hammered into action. It means revering our own reason & intuition as God's best gifts to us, and revering our own experience as the arena in which God is working God's purpose out through the activity of the Holy Spirit. It means searching in all those places for guidance about how and what and why to pray as we grow in our own relationship with God.

There are not many certainties in that prescription. We will probably never stop wanting them, but certainties do not have much to do with freedom or love or prayer, especially prayer. If we want to give up second hand religion, religion we know about only through the Bible, if we want to shoot for our own living experience of the faith, we will spend an enormous amount of time in prayer. We will spend time not only talking to God but listening to God, and listening sometimes to what only sounds like silence, or to our own wild howls and shuddering sighs, believing that the Holy Spirit groans with us and bears what we cannot say to the throne of God, and there with

Jesus Christ makes our prayers acceptable. Believing that, there is no prayer we cannot pray, and nothing in the silence to fear, and everything to gain. For “we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.” What is that purpose, for each of us? Ask. Pray. And listen – above all, listen.