

Romans 8:26-39 Pastor Bill Uetricht Pentecost 8 7/26/20

When you are a pastor, you are often considered the professional pray-er. Back in the good old days, when people actually got together for large group gatherings and banquets, you as a pastor were frequently invited to offer the invocation, something that perhaps lasted 30 seconds, while the evening might have gone on for three hours. When you went to someone's house for dinner, you as the pastor would be asked: would you pray, pastor? You get paid for it. You know how to do it.

Well, on a superficial level, I probably do. I can put together a string of words that generally sound good and get the job done. But if I am honest, there are many times when I feel as if I don't know what to pray. Or, more accurately, I don't even know how to begin to pray. It's not that I cannot come up with the words, although once in a while that has been true. It's that I don't even know where to start. What should I even be praying about? What do I really want? James Dunn says that the problem is not that we know what we need and merely lack the right words for requesting it, but we "do not know what to want," let alone how to ask for it.

I get that. And I get it now more than ever. The pandemic has left me wondering not only about what to say but even about what to want to say in prayer. You would think that years of praying would make it all easy. It would be, I suppose, if prayer is simply choosing sweet and appropriate words that are likened to clichés that simply put life, one's feelings, one's experiences into some neat little package. If prayer is the struggle of life and faith, however, then right words, right intentions, even right wanting can sometimes evade us.

That's why for me Paul's words in today's reading from Romans are so meaningful. "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.” God knows the mind of the Spirit who is within us. And this Spirit is praying to God on our behalf.

In other words, God is praying to God for us. That’s remarkable. That is the deepest expression of Paul’s understanding of the gospel. It truly *isn’t* about us. We don’t even have to pray right. We don’t have to know what we want. Let’s be honest. Too often we don’t know what we want, don’t know what to pray.

Oh, this understanding is so different than much of modern American Christianity, which is often about getting all your stuff together, discovering the six keys to a happy and successful prayer life. Maybe the major key is really that it isn’t about you figuring it all out. It’s about the God who prays in and through us, sometimes with the sighs that we breathe, the anger that we feel, the doubts we experience, the grief that overwhelms us, even the screams that we scream. They belong to God, not just us. Prayer isn’t about getting it all right. Prayer is about the Spirit who prays for us.

Paul not only says that the Spirit prays for us; Jesus is said to intercede for us. “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 is raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.” This is courtroom language. We are placed in the court, and all the potential witnesses gathered there can’t really say a word against us, since, “If God is for us who could be against us?” The God who is said to have given up his son is on our side. And this Son is said to be sharing with God the leadership of the universe. And *he* is advocating on our behalf.

God is for you. Christ is advocating for you. So, who, then, can bring a charge against you? Can your living or your dead parents? Can

an abusive spouse? Can a judgmental religion? Can a crabby member of your church? Can the Jones who live next door to you? Can a culture that continually feeds you lies about what gives you worth and meaning? No, they can't! If *God* is for you, who could be against you?

What is able to separate you from the love that God has had from before the beginning of time for you and for me? Can our everyday, garden-variety suffering and our big-time suffering separate us? Can the things that rule us, the big systems that almost penetrate the air that we breathe together as human beings in human cultures? Can the more personal systems—the families we come out of, the dysfunctions that run in our families, the addictions so much want to rule our lives? Can these things sever our connection to love? No!! We are more than conquerors, not through our heroic actions, but through the gift of God in Christ. Nothing at all can keep us from the love that is rooting us on, that is sighing with us, that is advocating for us, that is praying on our behalf, that is the first word, the middle word, and the final word.

It seems to me that this is the pearl of great price. This is what is worth selling all in order to be discovered by it. This is the treasure hidden in the field. This is what matters above all matters.

It is interesting to note that Jesus, as he in Matthew describes the matter that matters most, reveals it (call *it* the kingdom of heaven or reign of God) as something that is remarkably mysterious. In other words, once again, it isn't our creation. It is hidden, yet still very real. It's like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with a *large* amount of flour until all of it was leavened. It is like a tiny mustard seed that someone sowed in the field that eventually created a big enough tree so that birds could put their nests in it.

Who knows how it all happens? There is a mystery to the ways of God. But these ways are still very real. Hidden in our lives is a love that is rooting us on. Hidden in our lives even right now in the midst of this

horrible pandemic is a love that is for us, not against us. One of the things, though, that you need to be prepared for when you are dealing with Jesus is that the hidden love that is for us can come through unexpected means. Let's face it. In Biblical days, mustard plants were considered noxious weeds. And leaven was normally viewed negatively. It was thought to be the substance that polluted a greater reality. It was the one bad apple that ruined the whole bunch.

But when Jesus talks about the ways of God, he speaks of mustard seeds and leaven. When Jesus talks about the ways of God, he speaks of a man who, while roaming around on someone else's property, discovers a treasure, hides it in the field and then buys the field from the owner who musn't know that the treasure is there. What a grand hero! When Jesus speaks of the ways of God, he talks about a net that brings in *both* the bad and the good.

Oh, we thought the religious life was about clear-cut answers, the moral versus the immoral, pretty prayers, orderly lives, perfect appearances. But the love of God that is rooting us on, that is the pearl of great price, comes through a variety of wild and strange places and people. It's hidden sometimes in our struggles. It's hidden sometimes in people we call enemies. It's hidden sometime even in our death experiences. It's hidden sometimes in our shadow sides, our dark sides. And I am convinced that it is hidden right now in the horror of a virus that is unsettling everything.

But I have to be honest. What that love is up to too often right now evades me. I am too often confounded. Thank God that the Spirit of God is interceding for you and for me with sighs too deep for words. I've been sighing a lot. So have you. The Spirit who roots us on is in the midst of the sighing.