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Sermon: "The Spirit Helps Us"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

## WHEN THEOLOGY DEGENERATES

He was a graduate from a prestigious seminary. He thought that he knew all about prayer and was confident in his pronouncements about the Bible, until that fateful day he took a hike with his nine-year-old daughter in the mountains of Western North Carolina.

They weren't alone. In fact, they were part of a very large group making their way up the mountain that day. Perhaps that is why they didn't notice at first when his daughter wandered off on a side trail.

But, when the group stopped to rest, he discovered, to his horror that his daughter was missing. What followed was a two-hour search as night was falling. He later told a friend, "In such circumstances you would be surprised how quickly your theology degenerates."

At first he prayed, "Lord, please help me find my little girl!" A short time later he began to pray, "Lord, if you will let me find her, I promise to be the best father ever. I will never again raise my voice to her." Finally, as night fell and the search became more desperate he prayed, "God, if I don't find her. If anything happens to her, you and I are finished. I will never speak to you again. I will hate you forever. God, let me find her now!"

He eventually did find his daughter, but more than that, he learned a lot about his own prayer life. This "sophisticated" theologian's prayers went from pleading to bargaining to outright threats!

It's so easy to act like an expert on prayer, pontificating from this nice high pulpit on Sunday morning. We know the assurances of the Bible concerning prayer. We repeat the model prayer; the Lord's Prayer almost every Sunday. Why should prayer be a problem? It's not for many of us; at least today it's not.

But, place us on a lonely mountain at our wits end and prayer is not some theoretical discussion. It is a matter of life and death. And in that moment, no matter how well versed we may be in the Scriptures and the promises of the Bible; we find that we don't know how to pray. Either the words won't come, or if they do come, they are the wrong words.

## A PERSONAL PRAYER

Some of you may have been here several weeks ago when we had a worship service celebrating the gifts of women. The focus that day was on prayer, and we had a special speaker, a lay minister who gave her thoughts on prayer. She talked about using the Lord's Prayer as a model and how the many names of God give us a way to focus on different aspects of God's character and grace.

I thought it was a very helpful sermon, but I was intrigued by something that happened in the second service after the sermon. When we were taking prayer requests, our speaker was led to share some personal information. Her husband was seriously ill. Would we please pray for him? Up until this point, our speaker was extremely poised and self-assured, but now her voice crackled with emotion. It was as if she didn't know what to say.

But, I believe the Spirit led her to be vulnerable with us at that moment. And in that moment we learned about prayer in a new and deeper way. And we felt a deeper connection with her as well.

Prayer is not just a discourse about what the Bible says. Prayer is trusting God's Spirit to lead us when we don't know where to go and we don't know what to say. In a sense, that describes most of us most of the time.

## EFFECTIVE MINISTRY

A recent graduate of a seminary took a job as an associate pastor at a large church. He had only been there three months when the pastor decided to go out of the country on a mission trip, leaving the new, young pastor in charge. Those of us who have been pastors know what happens when the senior pastor leaves, everything! This case was no exception.

On the second day after the senior pastor left, there was a terrible tragedy. A couple in the church that had just adopted a little boy from El Salvador were involved in a terrible tragedy. The father, a dentist in town, was backing the car out of the driveway and ran over the toddler. He was dead by the time they got him to the hospital.

The young pastor said, "I entered that home to the wailing, horrible sounds of those young parents. I knew how badly they had wanted a child, how long they had waited. It was just terrible, those howling, grief-filled screams."

"I reached the living room and she reached out to me and I just lost it. I cried, wept with them. Eventually I said, 'Would you like me to have a prayer?' They said yes. I began to pray, but my voice cracked, and I broke down again. The mother put her arm around me and comforted me! It was terrible. Horrible. I left that home feeling like the biggest failure as a pastor."

"Two days later we had the funeral, and the mother said to me, 'Your ministry was such a comfort to us.' And I thought, 'A comfort? I was terrible. She continued, 'When I saw that you were just as heartbroken as I was, it really helped me. I felt that I could go on as long as my pastor really felt how terrible all this was.'"

I've lived this story in many different places and many different ways. And over the years I have come to trust the truth of God's promise as we find it in Paul's letter to the Romans. We are not alone. The Spirit of God helps us, prays for us in groans that are too deep for words. And to expand that a bit, I think that God's Spirit sometimes uses our groans of anguish as a way to minister to others.

## WHAT IS PRAYER?

If you would ask the average person, "What is prayer?" Most would answer, "Prayer is when we ask God for things." That is partially true, but prayer is much more than just making requests.

When I teach my confirmation classes about prayer, I use a pneumatic device to help them remember the various parts of prayer. Undoubtedly many of you have heard this one. I use the word "acts." The letters stand for adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication (or asking for things).

I think it's appropriate that asking for things comes last in the list because I think asking for things should come last in all our prayers. But, more times than not, asking for things is the first thing we do.

In order to pray in Jesus' name, before we ask for things, we must first align our hearts and minds with the will of God. In the Lord's Prayer, the model prayer, you'll remember that Jesus began by deferring to the will of God saying, "Thy kingdom come" and "Thy will be done." Some people say that every prayer should be ended as Jesus ended his anguished prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. "Nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done."

In other words, the point of prayer is not to get what we want. The point of prayer is to affirm what God wants. The point of prayer is to more closely align our will with God's will.

But, if we pray in that fashion, we are admitting that, when it comes right down to it, we don't know how to pray, ever. After all, who knows the will of God? Indeed, that's exactly what Paul tells us in our lesson for today. We do not know how to pray. (Romans 8:26)

When it comes to prayer we are always beginners. Prayer, true prayer will always be a struggle. True prayer begins not with cool logic but with the heat of heartfelt emotion.

### THE STRUGGLE OF PRAYER

I do not trust those who set themselves up as "spiritual masters" who blithely claim an ability to show us a six-step path to spiritual nirvana. It does not jibe with what I know about prayer as portrayed in the Bible.

Prayer is not some laid back form of meditation. Prayer is a struggle to trust and have hope when all is not well. Prayer is a struggle to believe when all around there is personal and public destruction. Prayer is finding the courage to run up against the hard realities of life while trusting God to lead us home.

A father told of a summer program for entering college freshman at Wheaton College. It's called the high road program and it is designed to place students in circumstances where they must do those things which seem completely beyond them.

He wrote,

"Dividing into small groups, each student is given a pack containing wilderness living essentials. Under the watchful eye of trained leaders, they are then sent out to trek through the wilderness.

They are instructed how to use their compass before being given a destination at which they should arrive within a certain number of days.

Cooking their own food over an open fire, they wear the same clothes day after day and brush their teeth with nature's toothbrush. Traveling by canoe more miles than one can imagine, they portage over land carrying the canoe over their heads and rappel from wilderness cliffs."

He continued,

"The purpose of this experience is not to make students suffer. It is a way of stripping away the superficialities of life and bringing the individual down to the basics." "Hopefully," the father said, "it will press the person beyond his or her own abilities and help them to trust in God."

Paul is talking about a similar process in our lesson for today. He tells us that all of life is our "high road" of adventure. We need not retreat in fear when challenges come because we are not slaves to the powers that be. We are children of God. The Spirit helps us remember that fact and prompts us to go forward in our quest for God's kingdom. (Romans 8:14-16)

But, that does not mean it will be smooth sailing, far from it. As we share in the glory of being God's child through Jesus Christ, we will also share in Christ's suffering as well. There is a reason for our struggle.

Just as the father let his daughter go on a dangerous wilderness experience as a way of helping her understand her weakness and need for God, so our heavenly Father uses the struggles of life as a way of helping us understand our dependence upon Him alone for our salvation.

The struggles of life make us groan in pain, but they also make us groan in anticipation for that kingdom of God which comes. The struggles of life knock us to our knees, and it's when we are on our knees that we learn the truth, the truth about ourselves and the truth about the world in which we live.

## DIVINE INTERVENTION

Friends, when we take an honest look at our lives and the world in which we live, we'll see that we need more than just a fresh start in a new place. We are so messed up that we have no idea where to go or what to do.

We need divine intervention. We need God to reach down and change us from the inside out. And that's exactly what we get.

Today is the day of Pentecost. Today we remember how the coming of God's Spirit changed everything long ago. But, the Day of Pentecost is about more than just remembering what happened long ago. On the Day of Pentecost, we remind ourselves that the story continues. God's Spirit still comes among us. God's Spirit is still in the process of changing everything, in our lives and in the world.

Now the cynic might say, "You Christians are dreamers. Where do you see signs of hope? The hearts of men and women are just as dark today as they were two thousand years ago. Where can I see this spiritual change that you talk about?"

I would be hard pressed to disagree with the cynic's analysis. All we have to do is watch the evening news and once again I think of what the philosopher Hegel who wrote, "History teaches us that man does not learn from history."

But, Christians believe that there is something else going on in the world. Christians believe that life is not just more of the same. Christians believe that in the middle of all that suffering and pain, in the middle of all that talk about war and revenge, there is another force present.

It is hard to see. According to our passage for today, hope is always hard to see. Indeed, at times it may be well nigh invisible. (Romans 8:24) But, that is the nature of hope. Hope is almost invisible to the naked eye, but then it reaches out and grabs you.

For instance, put yourself in the place of those first disciples. One moment you are in the most hopeless of situations and in the next moment your eyes are opened to a whole new world. One moment you are hiding behind locked doors hoping that the Romans won't be able to find you, and the next moment you are on the streets of Jerusalem, preaching the gospel openly to those same people you feared just a few moments ago. One moment you are a Jew with a backwoods accent, and the next moment you find yourself preaching in a foreign language to the whole wide world.

Sound impossible? You better believe it. Did it happen? The fact that we worship here today is living proof that it did happen. Again and again the “powers that be” tried to silence the message. In every century the disciples of Christ faced what looked like overwhelming odds.

But, in every age the Spirit of Christ interceded for the saints in groans too deep for words. In every age the Spirit enabled disciples of Christ to speak in a language that was foreign to the world. It was a language of peace in a world filled with war. It was a language of love in a world filled with hatred.

Don't ever think that the Spirit led those first disciples to an easier life, far from it. They were called to leave their homes, their jobs and their families. If we can believe the tradition of the church, most all of the apostles met a martyr's death. But, they spread a message of hope that has not died even until this day. The Spirit still helps us in our weakness, and that makes all the difference.

The question for us is this, “Will we be led by the Spirit of God as revealed in Jesus Christ or will we be led by some other Spirit?” Will we allow the Spirit of God to help us in our struggle or will we, like the little toddler, insist on doing it ourselves, even though we have no chance to succeed.

#### AN EXAMPLE OF HOW THE SPIRIT WORKS

It's amazing what can happen when people allow the Spirit of God to take over their lives.

Tony Campolo told a story about a deacon who was struggling to open himself to the leading of God's Spirit. Finally, the deacon decided that there was one thing that he could do. He could take the youth group to the nursing home.

So he did it. Once a month they went and put on a little church service for the people who lived there.

Once when he was at the service in the back of the room, an old man in a wheel chair rolled over to where this deacon was standing. He took hold of the deacon's hand and held it all through the service.

This hand holding was repeated the next month and the next month and so forth for the next year.

And then one Sunday afternoon the man wasn't there. The deacon asked the nurse in charge, “What happened to that man?” She replied, “He's near death. He's just down the hall in the third room. Maybe you should go visit him. He's unconscious though.”

So the deacon walked down to the room and took the hand of the unconscious man in the bed. Led by the Spirit, he instinctively said a prayer. And when he said “Amen” the old fellow squeezed his hand. For some reason the deacon was so moved by that hand squeeze that he began to weep. He was shaking with emotion as tried to leave the room.

And as he left he bumped into the nurse who taking care of this man. She said,

“He's been waiting for you. He said he did not want to die until Jesus came and held his hand. I tried to tell him that after death he would have a chance to meet Jesus and talk to Jesus and hold Jesus' hand. But he said, 'No. Once a month Jesus comes and holds my hand, and I don't want to leave until I have a chance to hold the hand of Jesus once more.'”

There you have it. Hope that was not seen and the power of the Spirit praying in groans too deep for words.

I cannot begin to imagine how opening our lives to the power of the Spirit may change us. I cannot imagine the places we may be led to go and the struggles we may experience.

But, I do know this.

The Spirit will help us. The Spirit will give us the strength to do what we have to do and the Spirit will give us the words we need to say. And when we are overcome by some difficult situation and words fail us, the Spirit will take over completely and intercede for us in groans too deep for words.

May God give us the faith to rely on this precious promise.

Amen.