

Romans 8:26-30
October 2, 2016
First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, NC
Rev. Pen Peery

Lord, Teach us to Pray: When We Don't Know What to Pray

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. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

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This morning we conclude our sermon series on prayer by considering what to do in those times when we don't know what to pray.

I've felt the need for a bit of levity this week, so as I thought about occasions when people have had trouble knowing what to pray my mind immediately went to a scene from that high-brow piece of cinematic genius – *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. The scene I'm thinking about takes place right as the family sits down to the dining room table for the big meal – when Clark W. Griswold looks over to Great-Aunt Edna and asks her to say grace.

“Grace?” Aunt Edna responded, “She died thirty years ago!”

“The blessing,” her husband, Uncle Lewis growled. “They want you to say the blessing!”

And then Aunt Edna starts: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America...”

And then Uncle Eddie stands up and puts his hand over his heart...

“...one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Amen!

Sometimes we don't know how to pray as we ought...

One of my favorite worship services of the year is Youth Sunday. I'm always deeply moved and deeply grateful for the witness of our young people. I also know that, for the Youth Director, Youth Sunday is one of the more stressful times of the year because it's always a bit of a moving target. Youth Directors work really hard to teach young people about the various parts of the worship service, and to help young people create the children's times, the prayers, and the sermons. But then someone shows up on Youth Sunday who didn't attend any of the prep sessions and yet still wants to participate.

14 years ago when I worked with young people that someone was Marshall. Marshall was a nice kid – but as someone who was big into theater, his interest was less on the fundamentals of worship and more on the performance.

When he showed up at 10:45 on Youth Sunday the only part of the service that we could spare was the prayer after the offering. I already had it typed up on a piece of paper. All Marshall had to do was read it.

So with the youth ushers standing in the front, holding the offering plates, Marshall began: first, he tapped his lavaleir mic (“is this thing on?”).

Then he proceeded to give a short overview of the sermon one of his classmates had just preached (“what I think Amanda was trying to say was that God loves us just the way we are...”).

Then he complimented the choir (at which point I was practically waving my copy of the prayer that he held, unused, in his hand).

And finally, all out of ideas, he moved to wrap up his remarks/“prayer” – but unable to remember the word “amen,” he settled for another phrase he had heard from time to time in church, saying “this is the word of the Lord.”

To which the congregation – stunned and a little confused – responded with a half-hearted “Thanks be to God.”

Yes...sometimes we do not know how to pray as we ought...

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The good news, says the apostle Paul, is that even when we don't know how to pray as we ought God sends the Holy Spirit to intercede for us with sighs too deep for words.

Three weeks ago when we began this sermon series I made some crack about what happens in church meetings when I ask if someone would like to open or close a meeting with a word of prayer. Eye-contact becomes scarce. Silence permeates the room. Since that sermon I've been in a few church meetings and I've ask the question, “who would like to close us with a word of prayer.” You know what happened? Eye contact became scarce. Silence permeated the room.

I thought about quoting the Apostle Paul. “Just start! The Spirit will intercede!”

But that’s not what Paul is really talking about here.

We don’t need the Spirit to intercede for us because we feel too uncomfortable to pray, or too inadequate to pray, or too inarticulate to pray.

Paul didn’t address these verses in Romans to us in order that we might feel better about our perceived lack of eloquence. Paul wasn’t being modest about our inability to pray as we ought.

He was serious.

We really don’t know how to pray as we ought.

I bet you have felt what Paul is talking about. I have.

Sometimes we really don’t know what to pray for.

It happened to me last week.

All of the unrest in our city. All the pain. The grief of the families of Keith Scott and Justin Carr. The angst of Officer Vincent and his family who have certainly just lived through a difficult week. The anger of a part of our community that feels unheard. The safety of our neighborhood. The places in our society where there continues to be inequality and injustice.

I found myself wondering what to pray for...

Do I pray for peace? What kind of peace? Peace for me? Peace of mind?

Do I pray for change? What kind of change? Do I even really know what changes we need?

We don’t know how to pray as we ought...

We’ve all experienced those places where we’ve needed God to intervene – where we are *desperate* for God to do something – but where the issues are complicated: around family, and relationships, and marriage; around disease where quality of life and fear and grief create a mess that makes it hard to know what to hope for; around societal issues that require us to balance the values and needs of so many different kinds of people.

Who knows how to pray for the right things?

And, sometimes, when we pray we sell God short. Maybe we know what to pray for, but we lack the faith to say it out loud because in our heart of hearts we wonder if God is really capable of doing what seems to us to be impossible. Or, maybe we are guarding ourselves against what it will feel like if our most honest prayers appear to go unanswered.

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The Apostle Paul knows that these are the limitations of those of us who – even on our best days – stumble and trip in our attempts to walk the path of faith.

Paul knows that our prayer life, like the rest of our life, is and always will be a far cry from what it could be.

In the same way that Paul, in other places in the Bible, says that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” or “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see God face to face,” Paul writes about prayer in the full knowledge that we do not know how to pray as we ought, because as broken and sinful human beings, we do not really know what we ought to be praying for.

If prayer is our line of communication with God – the connection is full of static. Our self-interest, our inability to see the big picture, our ignorance about the lives of those we have never met...all of this constrains our ability to pray as we ought.

Paul isn't the only one who knows that. God knows that. And that is why God sends us his Spirit to intercede for us – to clear that line of communication – so that when our words fail, there is still a connection.

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I've met enough therapists in my time, and done enough therapy, to know that when it comes to relationships even imperfect communication is better than no communication.

We might not know how to pray. We might be limited in our ability to pray for the right things. We might even be timid, or embarrassed by the invitation to pray.

But we can try. We should try.
Because at it's most elemental – our prayers are not designed for us to change God. Prayer is the method by which God changes us.

And the more we pray – however imperfect – the more we can grow in our relationship with the God who grants us this abundant and amazing life through the power of the cross and the empty tomb.

In closing, I want to pray – using the (apapted) words of Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk who lived in an abbey in Kentucky.

Let us pray:

O Lord, our God,

We have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us, and we cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do we really know ourselves, and the

fact that we think we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so.

But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing. We hope that we will never do anything apart from that desire, and we know that if we do this, you will lead us by the right road though we may know nothing about it.

Therefore, we will trust in you always, though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, we will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.