

9th Sunday after Pentecost A 30 July 2023

Romans 8:26-39

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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. Let's pray: ...

Hands up, if, like me, you struggle from time to time with how and what to pray. Good. You needn't be shy. In the epistle assigned for today, St Paul tells us that we don't know how to pray. And add to this his encouragement to the church of the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17 NKJV), I think you'll agree that we all need help.

And, thanks be to God, we have a gracious, loving, heavenly Father who does provide for us, especially in our weakest moments. Supporting our feeble attempts to pray, is the Holy Spirit interceding for us continually.

First, St Paul teaches us that God has a purpose for the Holy Spirit in our lives: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness." The Holy Spirit is here with us, to help us in our weakness. Collectively, we have a weakness. What might that be? Our weakness, the weakness shared by all of humanity, is that we are feeble and powerless to do anything apart from God.

"Likewise" or "And in the same way," says that what the Spirit is doing in us corresponds to what precedes. A few verses earlier, St Paul says that "we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23). As we wait out the time yearning for the event that is coming, the Holy Spirit is with us to help us through it.

The Spirit helps our weakness. Imagine, the Holy Spirit digging in with us in the trenches of our weakness and shouldering the burden of all that we can't carry. The word translated here as "helps" is the word [συναντιλαμβάνεται - sunantilambanetai]. Let's break it down: *syn* - *anti* - *lambano*.

Syn means “closely identified with”, “union” or “together with”. Think of the process of making biscuits or baking a cake. Once you’ve mixed all the ingredients together and then baked them, it’s impossible to separate the ingredients again. This is the “union” expressed by the word *syn*. So, along with us, the Holy Spirit takes hold of the burden in order to help us. We have our part, which is to wait hopefully, choosing to endure or suffer whatever comes our way, “But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” [Romans 8:25], and the Holy Spirit does his part.

Anti means “corresponding” or “facing”. Think of someone struggling to move a heavy log. Another person comes along and picks up the other end to help. One is on each end of the log, and they face each other as they work together to move the log. In the same way, the Holy Spirit is here with us doing his part to help us in our weakness.

Lambano means to “aggressively lay hold of” or “possess”. This means the Holy Spirit is fully invested in our well-being. You can see how excited and passionate St Paul gets as he overflows with joy at sharing this good news with the saints in Rome. He runs all three words together to emphasise the highly personal interest the Holy Spirit has in helping us to the extent that he supplies the help that exactly corresponds to our need. The Holy Spirit is highly motivated, intimate, and connected in a personal way with us, that’s deeper than our own conscious awareness of him.

Second, St Paul shows us our problem. We have a particular weakness. There seems to be two things linked together. [Romans 8:18-25] shows us that we struggle to trust God in suffering and bear up come what may because God is in control. We know in our heads that God is in control, but we tend to fall easily into self-pity when things aren’t all hunky-dory.

And coupled with this weakness is our inability to pray as we should: “for we do not know how to pray as we ought.” Thankfully, the Holy Spirit takes hold of our situation, and does what we can’t do. We say, “God I trust you, but I need your help. I don’t even know what to pray.” And the Holy Spirit picks up the other end of the log.

It's not as though we don't pray. I know you do. But we don't know how to pray and struggle with what to pray, because we don't understand what God's doing when we're afflicted with suffering. We often pray in light of what we think is best for us. But, as St Paul tells us, we don't know how to pray as we ought.

So, the purpose of the Holy Spirit is to help us, to pick up the end of the log we can't carry. The power of the Holy Spirit is that he knows exactly how to pray and what to ask for us: "but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Isn't this wonderful news, Saints! The Holy Spirit knows exactly what's going on in our lives and knows exactly what to pray, because he is God. What fantastic support we have. The Holy Spirit sees when we struggle with prayer, and immediately steps in and prays for us.

Isn't it true that most of the time when we're in the midst of suffering, we're inclined to pray for our problems to cease? It seems too difficult for us to be patient and believe that God uses our suffering for good according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). Even the apostle Paul prayed three times that God would remove the thorn in his flesh, but God had his plans for Paul's ministry according to his purpose. Still, when we pray this way, the Holy Spirit makes good the deficiencies in our prayers.

"But that very Spirit intercedes." The verb, intercedes [ὑπερεντυγχάνει] is in the present tense. It's an immediate action. At any time, when help is needed, the Holy Spirit intercedes "for us." The Holy Spirit acts on our behalf. The Holy Spirit works all that is "spiritual" in us, especially our praying.

The verse goes on to say "with sighs too deep for words." Some people get carried away with themselves and declare that this refers to speaking in tongues. But this isn't the mystical prayer language gift that St Paul talks about in [1 Corinthians 14]. The word "sighs" or "groanings" is our best attempt to describe something that we can't really adequately express. This is uniquely the way the Holy Spirit communicates with our heavenly Father.

“that very Spirit intercedes”. The other thing to note is that it doesn’t mean the Holy Spirit takes our mumblings and teaches us what to pray because we don’t know how. God definitely initiates prayer; therefore, the Spirit is the one who leads us in prayer. What St Paul is talking about, is something that never reaches our conscious thought. This isn’t us thinking or saying anything; this is intimate communication in the Godhead.

Let’s pull everything together now. The context that St Paul is addressing through this passage, is about believers going through suffering, pain, and tribulation. It refers to those who walk according to the Spirit (Romans 8:4). In [Romans 8:28] it says, “for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” That’s you, Saints. When we go through the dark valleys of deep suffering, when our hearts yearn for the will of Father God, he is so into you – he cares so much for you, that your groanings become his as he takes them and prays the perfect will of God for you when you haven’t got a clue what to ask. Is there any greater love?

Think about a lawyer who prepares a case for court. He must discern whether the client is telling the truth, then takes all the information and puts it in order. He then takes it to the trial lawyer who presents it to the judge. Friends, we have double the comfort as [Romans 8] shows us that we have two lawyers. One is the Holy Spirit, and the other is our Lord Jesus Christ. [Romans 8:34] says: “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.” Now that’s formidable advocacy on our behalf, wouldn’t you agree?

Friends, when I’m compelled through circumstances to pray, I’m suffering and in pain, not knowing how, but wanting God’s will to be done. It’s then that the Holy Spirit immediately picks up my burden, and takes my properly prepared case to our Lord Jesus who presents it to the Father. Together, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, perfect in every way, has our backs, come what may, Saints. All glory, honour, power, and praise be to God who loves us all. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.