

Matthew 6:5-15
Romans 8:18-27

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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THE SOUL ON ITS KNEES

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. *Romans 8:26*

Our theme is prayer, but a different sort of prayer than we may have been used to: prayer without words.

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, unuttered or expressed,
The motion of a hidden fire that trembles in the breast.

So wrote James Montgomery in his 1818 hymn. A more accurate image has seldom been expressed.

Prayer is our most basic means of communication with God. It is the healthy pulse of the soul. It gives a God-ward focus to our lives as surely as touch and conversation give intimacy to our human correspondences. Our prayers, like daily conversations, are necessary precisely because they forge a link between ourselves and God. Our sin separates us, not because God withdraws from us but because we withdraw from God and violate the promises we have made to God. Our finitude also separates us as by a veil that seems to be cast between earth and heaven.

So prayer unites us across that void and draws us near to God. But in those prayers we often struggle so much with the words. We live both by words and by faith, and each is sometimes a timid friend to the other. So we need another way to pray when words or faith falter, as they both will. "For we do not know how to pray as we ought," said Paul, "but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26).

I probably strike a resonant chord when I say that we've all had relationships that have been marked by awkwardness and unease. Times when we yearned for the right words or expressions but could not bring ourselves to speak. There are moments, said Victor Hugo, "When, whatever the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees." We want to be able to speak to God, as to a parent, but we do not have the words. These are the moments when the soul groans inwardly for want of expression.

Such was often the case with my own father and me. For many years we were like two long time commuters sharing a daily space. There were so many times as a youth and as a young man when I did not know quite what to say to him. I would be paralyzed with fear that he wouldn't understand or didn't care. And so a distance remained. But then, towards the end of his life, through the grace of our occasional encounters across many miles, we were drawn into a new knowledge of each other, and to an experience too long suppressed. Yet as I reflect now upon the good times we began to share, the images and memories coalesce now into a single feeling. I remember that, even when it was hard to bare the soul, it was finally just so good to be with him.

Tom Long has said of our relationship to our heavenly Father that after all the years that we've spent across the table from him, in Church, at prayer, at home, around this table, you'd think that we'd know what to say. But often we don't. We seldom know how to pray as we ought. Yet down at the root of all our inarticulateness, there's a fundamental relationship yearning to breathe free—one that, when we trust ourselves to an encounter in prayer, acknowledges that it is finally just so good to be with him. And that's the heart prayer.

We've probably all felt the sudden terror that can sweep over us when someone asks us, quite out of the blue, if we will lead a group in prayer. (At such a time I commend to you the Lord's Prayer to be said together—that Katherine read this morning—for it has such a uniting quality and is so universally known.) We've felt the stress of forming a prayer in good times when we could not find the words to give wing to a thankful heart. We've felt it in a time of crisis, when the soul was on its knees and the words wouldn't come and they clawed and struggled as if one by one over the lip of the soul, desperate to bring some expression, some

coherence to what was inside. In such moments I can imagine nothing more pleasing to God than for us to rise from prayer, no matter how ill-formed the word or uncultivated the language, and still be able to say, “It was just so good to be with him.”

Prayer is, after all, not a set of techniques, but at heart a relationship. And like any good relationship it is best nourished by honesty. And honesty needs to include—as in that multitude of unspoken gestures that signify love in a relationship—a willingness to pray to God in other than words. After all, words alone do not define us. We also laugh, cry, make music, express anger, frustration, even despair. These things speak for us when mere words might rob the moment of its passion and its honesty.

Such a moment began for me on a dark night at sea twenty-seven years ago (many of you may recall that I used to be a cruise officer on the QE2) when a summons to the telephone told me the news that a very dear friend was dead at just twenty-five, overcome by smoke in an apartment fire on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago. I left the ballroom and the noise and the conga line and all the evidences of life in its carefree playfulness and climbed to the observation deck 110 feet above a heaving sea. And I remember standing there, white knuckled, clinging to the rail, defying a howling wind as we raced into the weather at over thirty knots. And an angry sadness boiled within me. Finally, just standing there, terribly small in the vast blackness of night and sea, I screamed a single question over and over again into the rushing air: “WHY . . . WHY?”

Martin Luther demonstrated how well he knew God when he said something that takes us aback for a moment. We are sometimes closest to God, he said, when we raise our fist in anger, and even curse him, because to do that we have to trust him. And, Luther said, God has no children more dear than those who trust him.

In such moments when the poverty of mere words fails us, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness,” says Paul, “interceding for us with sighs too deep for words.” And God surely looks on with the compassion, understanding and patience of a loving Father; looks beyond the anger and embraces us. For what good parent does not recognize the pain of the moment and embrace a child in love to help them through that crisis?

Just so, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. Words are our language, the means of communication of us mortals. But God, I am convinced, listens for the larger communication of the soul, what Paul calls the inward groaning of the soul, what Hugo calls “the soul on its knees.” So, sometimes the best prayer is the one when we refuse to try to form the words into phrases but let the deep feelings of the soul rise like incense in their own unspoken language. To open the hands outward to God, letting the feelings stir and rise without the words, is as legitimate a prayer as we can make. It may feel strange, but it surely touches God who sends the Spirit to lift these feelings from us.

We need an advocate to speak for us when we cannot speak for ourselves; someone with our best interests at heart. Dr. Willis Tate tells of a letter he received when he was President of Southern Methodist University in Dallas. It was from a mother who, perhaps a little too protectively, wrote to intercede for her son. Her son, she wrote, was coming to S.M.U. as a freshman. She wanted to make sure that the boy had a good roommate who would encourage him to go to church and not use bad language. She wanted to be sure that the roommate would not grow a beard, or wear beads, or turn her son into a degenerate. She did not want a roommate for her son who would drink or smoke. She closed with this, “The reason all this is so important is that this is the first time my boy has been away from home—except, of course, for the three years he spent in the Marines.”

We are promised a wiser advocate. The Spirit of God within us, that exiled piece of God who speaks for us with sighs too deep for words. It’s a liberating image, this notion of the Spirit as a helper. It’s not the image of a prompter, one who merely stands in the wings and puts words in our mouths when the words run out, but as Greek best translates it, one who, “Takes hold at our side at the very moment of our weakness.” One who speaks for us when we can no longer speak for ourselves, like an advocate or a defense counsel, articulating our best interests to God. Such a one catches all the agony of our helplessness “when the soul is on its knees” before God, and lifts it, says Paul, as in a sigh, which God both hears and embraces.

It is the spirit of the sigh which often best speaks for us. So it was, on December 4, 1955, that Rosa Parks got on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She had worked all day, and she was tired. When she was told to move to the back of the bus, she refused, but not just because she was physically tired, she was morally tired. Tired of the injustices of segregation.

When the police asked the bus driver what she said when he asked her to move to the back of the bus, he

said, “She didn’t say anything. She just ... sighed.” That sigh was the beginning of the civil rights movement, a sigh too deep for words.

It is with a sigh, “a groaning” as Paul calls it, that creation yearns to return to its peace in God who made it. It is with a sigh that our own tired souls sometimes need to express their longing to return to their peace in God, a longing that Rudolf Bultmann referred to as “that faint recollection of Eden” that lingers in us all. It was with a sigh too deep for words, a cry of anguish and longing, you recall, that Jesus released his spirit from the cross and paved the way for God’s life in us.

How full of love is our God who, in our moments of great need, looks beyond the floundering words of his children and listens instead to the yearnings of the soul.

Amen.