A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*Learning Prayer*

Romans 8:26

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Fleming Rutledge, the wonderful New York City preacher with a thick southern drawl, writes that she eagerly awaits the summer in each 3-year lectionary cycle when she gets to preach through Romans. She must be happy right now because this is that summer, when the assigned lectionary readings move through the magisterial New Testament book of Romans. See, all 2020 isn’t bad.

Romans is a favorite of many Christians for more reasons that we can recount here. But of all 16 chapters in Romans, chapter 8 is everyone’s favorite. And the end of chapter 8 is the favorite of the favorite. I’ve heard more than one person say if they were about to be marooned on a desert island and could only take one page of the Bible with them, Romans 8 would be the one. No wonder, right? In the face of desperate trials, here is confidence in the resilience of the human spirit in God’s Holy Spirit and the security of the love of God in Christ—no matter what comes. That’s the reading we have this morning. It asks, “What can separate us from the love of God in Christ?” and then ponders serious travails: hardship. Can hardship separate us from the love of Christ? It can feel like it. What about distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword. God knows we all have something to add to the list of travails that humans face.

I know you can. South African pastor Trevor Hudson as a young minister spent some time working with Pastor Gordon Cosby in the small, ecumenical inner-city congregation Church of the Savior in Washington, DC. Every other pastor would love to be a fly on the wall for the conversations between those two. Before departing home, Hudson asked Pastor Cosby, “If you could say just one thing to me, what would it be?” Cosby was quiet a few moments, and then he answered, “When you go back to South Africa and minister in your congregation, remember always that each person sits next to their own pool of tears.”

What can separate us from the love of Christ? You remember how this ends right, with the reason why this is a favorite. What can separate us from the love of Christ? Nothing. Will these challenges separate us from the love of Christ? “NO. In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

We don’t feel like conquerors. Not most of us, most of the time. We need this confidence because without it we are left drowning in those pools of tears. We are not conquering heroes. St. Paul knows this. He says, “We are weak.” The same people he says can be spiritual conquerors, he also says are so weak, we do not even know how to pray. This keen insight into the human dilemma feels very familiar. One day we are intercessory prayer warriors ascending holy mountains, and the next, we don’t have mustard seed size faith to withstand even the slightest breeze of doubt and despair. Who are we? Both. Most of us are both.

The conquerors have a weakness: we do not even know how to pray as we ought.

Does that hit home for you? If not, on any level, I think you’re pretty unusual. I think most Christians would say, if they were to admit it, that sometimes, maybe whole seasons of their lives, they do not know how to pray as they ought. And they aren’t even sure what praying as they ought means. Prayer is a discipline and a trust and, at our best, a source of strength. It is also a mystery: How we creatures commune and communicate with the unseen God.

The first disciples of Jesus understood that there was something going on in prayer beyond their capacity, something they needed. We need help from beyond, from somewhere even beyond the human supports that sometimes strengthen and sometimes fail us. We need God’s help and need the renewal that comes from submitting ourselves to that which is greater, and wholly other than we are. We need prayer.

Ron Rolheiser describes how he imagines what led the first disciples to ask Jesus to teach us to pray, “They look at Jesus and sense that he drew his real strength and his power from a source beyond himself . . .he prays in virtually every kind of situation: he prays when he is joy filled; he prays when he is in agony; he prays with others around him; he prays when he is alone at night, withdrawn from all human contact. He prays high on a mountain, on a sacred place, and he prays on the level plane, where ordinary life happens. Jesus prays a lot.

“And the lesson is not lost on his disciples. They sense that Jesus’ real depth and power are drawn from his prayer. They know that what makes him so special, so unlike any other religious figure, is that he is linked at some deep place to a power outside this world. And they want this for themselves” (*Sacred Fire*, 170).

Seeing Jesus at prayer makes clear to the disciples their weakness in prayer and in everything else. It was not just his miraculous power they wanted for themselves. It was everything about him that they didn’t have that wasn’t true about themselves. “the power they wanted and admired was Jesus’ power to love and forgive his enemies rather than embarrass and crush them. What they wanted was Jesus’ power to transform a room, not by some miraculous deed, but by a disarming innocence and vulnerability… What they wanted was his power to renounce life in self-sacrifice, even while retaining the enviable capacity to enjoy the pleasures of life without guilt. What they wanted was Jesus’ power to be bighearted; to love beyond his own tribe, and to love poor and rich alike; to live inside of charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, long-suffering, faithfulness, gentleness, and chastity, despite everything within life that militates against these virtues. What they wanted was Jesus’ depth and graciousness of soul. And they recognized that this power did not come from within himself, but from a source outside of him . . .They saw it and they wanted that depth of connection too, for themselves. So, they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray.” (*Sacred Fire,* 171).

To say, ‘we are weak. we do not know how to pray as we ought” could easily be put another way, “We are weak. We do not know how to live as we ought.”

Does that hit home for you? If not, on any level, I think you are pretty unusual. The pool of tears is salted with the personal failures that most people live with. Much of the time we can’t hear the still, small voice of grace through the noise of the voices of self-condemnation that play on a loop in our minds.

We do not know how to pray as we ought. We do not know how to live as we ought. We do not know how to parent as we ought--how to read the Bible as we ought--how to work or save or give, or play or exercise or eat or study or think or love or laugh or have faith or hope as we ought. It is exhausting being humans, isn’t it? I don’t mean to suggest that we’re all abject failures in every aspect of life. Sometimes it feels like it. But if there’s a gold standard for life, the ought, how close are we coming to it? And even if the gold standard is utterly unattainable, how about the bronze standard? Or the pre-school take-home macaroni sculpture standard?

After over 20 years of pastoral ministry, I can say with confidence that most people sometimes—most people most of the time--feel pretty weak and pretty helpless in the face of life’s challenges, no matter what brave, conqueror-like persona they put forward.

That leads us to prayer—even if prayer is one of the places we feel weakest. It leads us to prayer. The first step in prayer is being honest about being in that place. Embrace it, own it, accept it. As soon as we can do that, it is as if we are confessing, “Well God, it turns out I am not God after all. I confess to you that I do not believe in myself or the power within me to overcome alone all the dragons that I face. I confess you are God, and I am not.” And that’s a good start to prayer.

And the next step is to pray, “Help me.” I think that is so important that until you do that, you do not know how to pray. Once you do that, you are on your way even if you don’t know what the next words might be. “Help me.”

If you need some encouragement, listen to the opening words from several of the psalms:

61: Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer; from the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint…

62: For God alone my soul waits in silence…

63: O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you…

64: Hear my voice, O God…

70: Make haste, O God, to deliver me! O Lord, make haste to help me.

Help me.

1500 years ago, Benedict of Nursia gathered a group of young men together to form the first monastic community in Europe. Like most Christian renewal movements before and since, they were earnestly dedicated to faithful, intimate discipleship to Jesus and to living as best as they knew how a life of prayer and service. *Ora et labora*, they said: prayer and work, work and prayer. To guide the group, Benedict wrote a rule of life for the community. This is the famous Rule of St. Benedict that is still followed until today around the world.

In Benedict’s rule, he lays out the work and prayer plan for daily life, including each day multiple regular times of gathered prayer and space for personal, devotional, contemplative prayer. As you know, if you have ever gone on retreat to a monastery, Lauds, the first prayers in the morning are super early. Normally a bell rouses you from your bed and you shuffle in to the chapel with other pilgrims and monks, yawning, trying to wake to the new day which has hardly begun. Then the prayer begins. The first words of the first prayer in the morning is this from Psalm 70: “O Lord, make haste to help me.”

The first prayer every day for people whose lives are devoted to prayer—who have made vows of prayer and have given their life to it—people who know what they are doing when they pray--who are living a life where distractions to prayer are minimized—people who have every advantage of prayer—their first words of prayer every single day: ‘ Lord, help me.” How much more for you and me?

In Romans 8, St. Paul promises that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. So do not lose heart. We may not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groans too deep for words.

If you feel alone these days, if you feel like prayer is a long way away, it is just beneath the words—or absence of words that you have… If you feel alone these days—even surrounded by an ocean of tears, let Romans 8 sit with you. If you don’t know how to pray or what to pray for, or how even to begin, just begin where so many others have begun and begun again and again. Begin again: Lord, help me. Come quickly to help me.

Trust the Spirit of God to help you in your weakness until you remember nothing, neither death nor life, not your best self or your worst, not the things in your life you don’t know how to do as you ought, nor the things in your life you don’t do as you ought, nothing in your past or what awaits you in the days to come, nothing high or low separates you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. You are within God’s love. You are within the Spirit’s power. You are within the compassionate heart of Jesus Christ.

It is there we find that where we are weak, God is strong. And to that, we say, Thanks be to God.

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