A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Pentecost Sunday

Romans 8:22-27

May 20, 2018

On the day of Pentecost, fifty days after the resurrection of Christ, Christians from all over the world gathered together were met by the sudden and powerful manifestation of the Holy Spirit right where they stood. Wind, the sound of thunder, tongues of fire. The Spirit was not dainty. The Spirit came with divine authority and holy wonder. And miracles happened. People who could not even speak with one another found themselves in dialogue. People who were divided from one another in all kinds of ways found themselves united in a mysterious power. Sons and daughters prophesy, they said. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. There is tremendous hope in this proclamation, for those people, for all people, for all creation.

And **that’s** how the church got its start. Not with a business meeting or with bylaws, or a paid staff or with buildings of their own, mission statements, or budgets, but in the chaotic power of Holy Spirit presence among people drawn together by confession that Jesus, crucified and risen, is Lord of heaven and earth, the Lord of all creation and the hope of our salvation.

What began there, for the church and for the world, still awaits its final consummation. In Romans, St. Paul presents an image of creation longing for its liberation. It is groaning. This description of a universe that is wounded, inhibited in its proper functioning, seems to speak well the reality of the world as we know it.

But there is still hope. The yearnings of creation are described as groans of birth pangs. The groaning is a sign of hope for what will come, what must come: peace on earth, goodwill to all. Life in the Spirit of God is always about hope, especially when hope seems impossible. It is in this kind of hope, resurrection sized hope, that we are saved.

We must not ever lose hope. Whatever else is true about the world, this is the world over whose primordial waters the Spirit hovered at the dawn of Creation. The same spirit guided the pen of those faithful saints whose poetry, remembrances, and epistles became holy writ. This is the Spirit promised as an Advocate who will testify on behalf of Jesus, the Spirit of truth who guides into truth, and glorifies the Father.

The text speaks of believers in this context, those whose lives are rooted by the spirit of God in the way of Jesus. Far from taking them out of a world marked by imperfection, unrest, violence, pain, the presence in them of the Spirit brings them into deeper solidarity with the rest of creation. Their sighings, their pangs of childbirth, their longings for wholeness and hope

merge with the longing of creation. The spirit that hovered over and calmed the waters of creation dwells within us, hovering over our weaknesses, bringing peace in our churning, churning.

In the Spirit, we can pray. With the Spirit’s help, we can pray to God. And Lord knows, few of us pray as we really ought, whether in disciplined regular prayer, or in the long hours of vigil, or in the face of tragedy.

How ought a person to pray anyway? Should we memorize and recite all the psalms? Is the Lord’s Prayer enough? Should we pray without ceasing or should we stop everything seven times a day for a prayer? Should I have a morning quiet time, or practice centering prayer, shut myself in a dark closet or find the nearest hilltop? Should we pray our own words or a written liturgy? Should we pray for healing or for mercy? For what we want or for God’s will? Do we pray on our knees, with hands folded or raised, with prayer beads, with a bell gong, or with songs and spiritual songs? Do we pray kataphatically, with many words of profession, or apophatically in silence? What if all I can do is sigh with a “Lord help me?”

How should we pray as we ought? And how do we do that when we’re so irregular at it—starts and stops, good intentions and lack of discipline, and all manner of ways we could do a whole lot better than we currently do. Maybe you don’t struggle with any of this, but a whole lot of people around you do. One of the secret shames of Christians is when they struggle to pray, which seems to them like it should be the most basic, easiest thing in the world to do. But habits of distraction and busyness are hard, so hard, to break. And then there’s the feeling of futility we don’t talk about so much. The feeling that prayer is good because we’re told it’s good, but it’s hard to see the practical results of its goodness in daily life. We see billboards promising “Prayer Works,” but what would that even mean? We’re skeptical, and not even sure that prayer should be evaluated as something that “works.” And we’ve become a little more Amos-like in at least one regard: take away from me your piously compassionate offers of thoughts and prayers for God’s power until you do something in your own power for justice and righteousness for the most vulnerable in our communities.

We have this hunch that prayer is other than a transaction with God that ”works.” It’s more like prayer is an act of love, and love is not something that’s supposed to work like magic wishes that will come true. It’s supposed to love. Prayer doesn’t work. Prayer loves. Maybe that helps, but how can I love God?

If we confess we don’t know how to pray, it's not that we don’t know words to pray; we have prayer words all around us. How many of you got *My Utmost for His Highest* for a graduation present? It’s something more than that that keeps us from knowing how to pray. St. Paul describes it as a weakness, or an infirmity. It’s like how you feel when you’ve got the flu or a bad cold. You know that feeling, like you’re trying to soldier your way through your day, but all you want to do is lie down on a bed, or even a table, or even a floor. It’s when you are so sick and worn out that even the tile floor at the store looks like it would be so comfortable if you could just lie there for a minute. That’s the idea. It’s spiritual, emotional apathy, or maybe

better said, it’s discouragement, even hopelessness. When you just want to give up. That’s the spiritual feebleness St. Paul is diagnosing. If it seems like he’s talking about you, you’re in good company.

This weakness has something to do with the nagging disconnect we feel way down here with God way up there, which probably should cause us to rethink the whole idea of God way up there and us way down here. In this passage God is not way up there where we have to reach by the efforts of our disciplined eloquent prayers or we have to convince to come down here by the force and passion of our utterances. God by the Spirit is here, entangled with us, within us, helping us pray with “groans too deep for words.” God is near, God is present. God is active. God may be unseen, but it may be because we’re not looking with our spiritual eyes wide open.

That’s where our true prayers lie. Below the words. Beyond the disciplines. Sometimes with words, often in silence, arising from the places in our souls we don’t talk about or examine too carefully too often, but where the truth about ourselves resides. When the mystics talk about our true selves, they aren’t talking about a self that is disconnected from who we are in daily life. They are talking about what is true about us, but is covered up, paved over, and packed away, and put in bondage by everything else. It’s the holy center of our beings lovingly created by God. You may not even know who you are anymore, but the Spirit does. The Spirit knows who you are. The Spirit searches the heart and knows who we are made to be as the beloved of God. It’s from that place, that the Spirit meets our being.

But let’s be real: we don’t know how to pray. We don’t know what to say. We don’t know what God’s will is. We don’t know how to pray for help from temptations, to pray for help in loving our enemies, or even our neighbors. We don’t know how to keep the commandments of God faithfully. WE don’t know what to do with shame and guilt. We don’t know how to find God’s call on my life. WE don’t know how to do the right thing. WE don’t know what to do with thoughts and prayers when our most compassionate thoughts and most heartfelt prayers seem impotent in the face of the all too real reality of tragedy and evil.

Sometimes we feel vulnerable, helpless, almost hopeless. We feel like we don’t have answers to questions we should know by now. If we’re to believe the whole creation has been groaning until now, we’re like, we feel you mother earth, we feel you sister wind, we feel you brother volcano. We’re right there with you.

Christian hope is believing that the agony of creation and that of humanity is like that of childbirth. Something good is coming, but we need some serious help to lay hold of it in a world and with hearts that groan with grief. Help us, Lord.

The word help in scripture seems like it would be a simple word. It is in English. It’s short. We know basically what it means. It’s a fly over word. But in Greek it’s long, seven syllables, a compound of three roots. Those roots, all put together for the word help, are about coming along side, lifting up, joining in, being with. The vocabulary of help is fashioned of participatory language. The only other time in the New Testament when the word is used is when Mary is sitting at Jesus’ feet listening to him teach, and Martha asks him to tell Mary to help her prepare the meal. Same word. Mary, it seems, wasn’t much help to Martha in the kitchen that day, much to Martha’s frustration. But the Spirit, it is promised, comes to help us in our weakness. Coming alongside, being with, entering in. The Spirit’s help isn’t transaction, it’s participatory with our spirits.

The Spirit of God who hovered over the waters of creation is within you. Deep within you, below the words or lack of words, below the confidence or your fears, down deep in the heart. The heart, broken, the heart full of possibilities, and full of the capacity to love, the universal capacity to love and to cry out to God when we can’t find any words to pray. When I am weak, then I am strong. When we do not know how to pray as we ought, the Holy Spirit turns our groans into God’s own language

St. Paul was right; we need a helper to know how to pray. But that’s not all. WE need a helper to know how to live. For all the things we don’t know, for all that makes us feel helpless, in this text are three things we know for sure:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now (v 22).

We know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose (v 28).

And we can be sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The same Spirit manifest at Pentecost in signs and wonders is within us and within the heart of creation praying now with groans too deep for words, but never too deep for grace. The world is not hopeless. We are not hopeless. You are not hopeless. The Spirit, full of power and grace, is here and with you as the very presence of God. In the Spirit, in this Spirit of Jesus Christ, you are the hope of the world. The Spirit is poured out on you so Sons and Daughters, prophesy to the truth of the world as it should be. Remind us of justice, righteousness, true compassion, and courage.

Young men, young women see visions of the world as it can be and then lead us there. Don’t just see the world as it is, see it as it can be. See yourselves as you can be. Do not just settle for lives the world tells you you must inhabit. Be co-creators of a world enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

Old men and old women, still dream dreams. Your day is not past. As long as there is breath in you, let that breath be spiritual life in you and through you for all around who need you to guide us in wisdom. Keep hope alive.

In all things, on all days, even when it seems the sun is turned to darkness, let us call on the name of the Lord, in whose name we shall be saved: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2018