

A Pentecostal Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“The Holy Spirit and Prayer”

By Eric Howell

Romans 8:22-27

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Today is Pentecost Sunday. It's the day we celebrate the birth of the church by the work of the Spirit. As Acts 2 gives the account, Jesus-followers from all over were gathered together in Jerusalem, and into the gathering the Spirit of God came upon them, resting on them like tongues of fire, enabling them to understand each other's language. Onlookers were amazed at the ecstatic spectacle happening in front of them. Peter stood to preach and told them about prophecy and promises fulfilled, the account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. People were moved and asked what must we do. Repent and be baptized. And they did. 3000 of them.

That same Spirit, present so powerfully on Pentecost Sunday, is present in the passage from Romans as well. And it is this word that speaks to us this morning. Like Pentecost day itself, the passage in Romans is about the Spirit and about our lives and the intersection, the meeting point between the two. It's about prayer.

It says, “We do not know how to pray as we ought.” And we're like, No Kidding. Scott Rushing knows this in a particular way. I don't mean that Scott doesn't know how to pray. I think he does. What I mean is that Scott, as our pastoral associate, has taken on the task this year of asking you to participate in worship each Sunday. DaySpring has a long tradition of involving different people in Sunday morning worship. Sometimes staff. Sometimes lay people. Usually a combination of the two. But always a variety of people from the congregation. When you see people coming up from their chairs out of the congregation, you are seeing the heartbeat of the church. We are all part of this body and we come out of it to lead and enable each other by our service. But a funny thing happens on the way to Sunday. Scott usually gets enthusiastic ‘yes’s for reading scripture or leading in litanies. He often gets ‘yes’s for the call to worship and children’s sermon. But he has noticed a reluctance from people to pray out loud. Now, why is that? “We don't know how to pray as we ought?” Well, some of you feel that way. You think that we demand an eloquent, theologically rich, lengthy, and profound prayer and that you just won't measure up. You think, you people have a filet mignon prayer life. All I've got is hamburger helper. Can I just pass out bulletins? Well, let me say to you—when Scott calls, please consider saying yes. If you are naturally eloquent, great, but we don't demand eloquence. If you are theologically rich, wonderful, but we don't require theological richness. If you are clear spoken, fantastic, but we don't stipulate proper enunciation. What we want is you. Authentically you. Because the authentic you is more like the rest of us than you might think it is. And when you pray out of your authentic self, you are allowing the Spirit to join our hearts in your prayer. So if you are called on, trust God's Spirit to help you overcome whatever nervousness you might experience. The Bible says, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness.”

But this confession “we don’t know how to pray as we ought” isn’t about just praying at the microphone, right? It’s about prayer, whenever and wherever it happens or is attempted. A lot of us would agree, “I don’t know how to pray.”

I haven’t prayed consistently for a long time. I don’t know how to even get started. I don’t know how to do it.

I’ve got this issue in my life, this unresolved issue, and I have taken it to God over and over again. I’ve confessed, I’ve praised, I’ve asked and begged. And now I don’t know how to pray anymore about it.

I find a moment to get quiet and pray. But all these distractions come in my mind. It feels like anything I have just bounces off the ceiling and comes right back down. If heaven is somewhere up there, my prayers are like lead balloons.

I want to pray for someone else, but I don’t even know where to start. There’s so much pain, such complexity. How do I even know what to pray?

If any of this sounds like you, I get you. Because I’ve been there. I’ve been in the position where I haven’t really prayed for a long time and just didn’t really know how to start again. I’ve been in the place where I felt like I just didn’t have anything left to bring to God. I’ve been in the place where it felt like my prayers just landed like a thud on the ground. I’ve been there on more than one time in life. Life is more like a cycle than a straight line.

When you go to pray and just can’t quite get there or don’t know what to even pray for, remember the Bible’s promise, “God’s Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding for us before God with sighs too deep for words.” Let the Spirit pray through you. Prayer isn’t just about your effort or ability. Sometimes prayer is simply, God send Your Spirit to pray in me now. I don’t have the words or even the thoughts to pray to You, so send Your Spirit. And I will wait and listen.

But even if we have new confidence behind the pulpit and renewed resolve in daily prayers, we still haven’t arrived at the heart of the scripture’s word to us. Prayer is not just a discreet event. At DaySpring we try to practice contemplative prayer. Which on one hand is a discreet event. At 5:30 on Wednesdays we start contemplative prayer which goes about 25 minutes. Beginning and end. Discreet. Finite.

But contemplative prayer is more than that. It’s an ongoing journey and conversation with God. The contemplative is someone who is always open to the presence and prompting of God, listening more than speaking, trusting more than demanding, living in the soul and less the head or emotions.

Prayer is often a discrete event, but it is more than that, it is an openness and awareness of the presence and prompting of the Spirit of God all the time. Pray without ceasing, the Bible says. This has more to do with how you are living than it does figuring out how to voice a prayer 24-7. It’s living your prayer. So, “we don’t know how to pray as we ought” means “we don’t know how to live as we ought.” And it’s no wonder that the Bible calls this our weakness. Some translations say that we have weaknesses and not

knowing how to pray is an example of our weaknesses. But I think that has missed the sense of the passage. Our weakness as humans is we don't know how to pray—not about being able to form right words or get settled in for quiet time, it's not knowing how to live as creatures of this God.

I've long been aware that around college age a lot of us ask the question, what is God's will for my life? Of all the dizzying array of choices, what should I major in? What company should I try to work for? What specialty will I be good at, enjoy doing, be successful in, and hopefully somehow be doing that which God has called me to do. Here I am, God, ready to do life. Just point me in the right direction and send me off!

Then I've also been aware of the mid-life crisis. Somewhere in our 40's or 50's when we become consciously aware of our own mortality. This ride is going to end. Not just life ends. My life is going to end. And I can start to see the end out there somewhere. Have I really lived yet? Help, God, I don't know what I'm doing. So we buy a corvette and take up pilates. I'm actually looking forward to my mid-life crisis. It sounds like fun.

What I was not aware of and have seen nothing written about or joked about is what I see in people in their late 20's and early 30's. It's not quite mid-life crisis. It's quarter-life desperation. It goes something like this: I've made it far enough through my education or early career to take a few knocks. I've got enough responsibilities and commitments to create some stress. I'm far enough along to realize I'm probably not going to change the world like I thought I could. And now the gap between who I thought I could be and who I am is apparent. This is life. It's my life. And I don't really know how to live it. I don't really know my potential or the limits of it. I don't really know the right balance between work time and family time. I don't really know how to get on top of my finances. I don't really know how to keep and grow friendships. Here I am. And I feel terribly isolated. It seems like everyone else has their lives together, and I feel like mine is coming apart. I don't know if I drink too much, if I sleep too much, if I spend too much. Should my spouse and I be fighting this much? Is there a normal out there that I'm just missing? Is there a key to ordering life and I'm the only one who didn't get the memo? It's a strange place to be where you get caught between: I really want to know how to do life and I don't want anyone telling me how to do my life. Help God, I don't know how to pray. I don't know how to do life.

The Bible says: "The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves." And in early years, and midyears, and later years, we agree: Yea, that's about right. If we have any hope at all, we are hoping in something we can't see. But that's what hope is, right? If you can see clearly, that's not hope.

And that's a word of encouragement to us this morning wherever we are in life. The world has more going on in it than what you pick up from your five senses. To believe and experience this promise, "the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words," is to be a person who is not reduced to a life lived within the limits of what you can see, hear, or touch. That kind of life, reduced to only what can be observed and seen, is an illusion. It's not real. It's self-deception and does not have spiritual ears to hear the

secret voice of God calling you to take a risk and venture by faith outside the reassuring and protective limits of the five senses (Merton, *New Seeds* 27-28).

Contemplative prayer is that other sense that is beyond a sense. A knowledge beyond knowing. A peace beyond understanding. A hope beyond seeing. A faith beyond logic. A prayer beyond words.

The Spirit is going before God for you in your greatest weakness. There's something deeper going on when we pray from our hearts. It is not the idea of accomplishing something, but awakening to our interior self and attuning ourselves inwardly to the Holy Spirit, so that we will be able to respond to His grace (sd, 85).

Paul Tillich says the following about prayer, but I'm going to substitute the word 'live' for his word pray: "It is God himself who lives through us when we live. Something in us, which is not we ourselves, intercedes before God for us. We cannot bridge the gap between God and ourselves even through the most intensive and fervent living; the gap between God and ourselves can only be bridged by God. . . . God knows more about us than that which we are conscious."

The Eucharist is a proper picture of these things. It is God Himself who comes to us in the bread and cup. There is nothing we can do of our own power or own words to make this meal more than it is by the Spirit. But we come, here at a meeting place between the spiritual world and the material world. And as we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste the bread and cup, we are given a gracious and deep awareness that God is doing more here than we are. And more than we are capable of doing. And if we can encounter that here, may it give us hope to experience it in our prayers—whether at microphone or at bedside, in joy or angst. God is always doing more than we are. And God is doing it in us and all around us and sometimes through us. And if we can encounter it here and experience it in our particular prayers, may God give us the grace to live all of life as a prayer with the eyes of our hearts open, that we can see with eyes that go beyond sight and hear it with ears that go beyond sound, we can sense it, the groans, the sighs of the Spirit all around us interceding before God, who carries us along.