

St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John D. Rohrs
6 Pentecost A; July 24, 2011
Epistle: Romans 8:26-39

Sighs Too Deep for Words

“You’ll be in my prayers.” Probably every one of us has said that to someone at one time or another. It’s a natural way to share concern, and it’s a promise to think of that person, to hold them in our hearts and offer their sorrows and struggles to God. It’s a genuine expression and a central aspect of the Christian life, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy. Prayer is hard. And I don’t just mean the logistics, like making time for it (that’s hard enough); I mean the content of our prayers.

How should we pray for someone who’s dying, for example? Should we pray that they miraculously get better, or should we pray that they die in peace? That’s not an easy question when it’s someone you love. Or look at a broader example. Let’s say we’re praying for the victims of a tsunami or for peace in the Middle East. Those are noble concerns, but when you stop to think about it how do you really pray for a whole nation of people? How can you even attempt to carry millions of people in your heart?

This is why today’s reading from Romans 8 is to me one of the most meaningful and important passages in the Bible. Paul is assuring his readers of the goodness and grace of God, and he talks about prayer; he writes that “when we don’t know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us in sighs too deep for words.” I love that phrase: sighs too deep for words. A lot of times, when you’re praying for someone you love or praying for a huge number of people, it’s just too much. You can’t hold it; you can’t put words to it. That’s when the Spirit comes and speaks in the language of God, in sighs too deep for words.

What this tells me is that prayer is not something we get right, like if we just pray hard enough or faithfully enough God will respond and all will be well. That’s not how it works. Prayer isn’t about effort. It’s not about how righteous and holy we are. Rather, it’s about the faithfulness of God and God’s covenant to sustain us, to love us, to intercede for us even when we’re angry or doubtful, speechless or despairing. Even and especially in those moments, God intercedes in sighs too deep for words.

This image of God's intercession leads directly to the closing words of this passage. It turns out that God is always interceding, not just in prayer but in all aspects of our faith, our life, our death. The message of Scripture, the message of the gospel is that God intercedes for us even to the cross and the grave, and that intercession is never dependent on how good we are. It's not about getting it right. Prayer, faith, life – these are not goals we achieve or contests we win or lose. They are all part of one interwoven gift of love and grace, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing we can do to squander this gift. Nothing, Paul says, can separate us from the love of God.

The closing words of this passage are so beautifully expressed that to say anything more just messes them up. I remember when we studied Romans 8 in seminary. At the end of the class my professor, who was like this world scholar on Paul, said he wanted to share a parting thought. We all got our notebooks ready to record this final pearl of wisdom, and without any commentary he simply recited the last words of this chapter, as tears rolled down his cheeks:

“For I am convinced 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.” Amen.