

Sermon for Trinity Church

Pentecost, 2024

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. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Here's a question for you: do you remember how you learned to pray? Perhaps more importantly, do you remember why you began to pray? I've searched my memory, and I cannot remember when I first learned to pray, nor can I remember being told why praying was important. I do remember various Sunday School classes about why we should practice good behavior, or read the Bible, or that we should never date Catholic girls. But surprisingly, I remember very little about prayer.

I learned a great deal about prayer years later while reading Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. There are several turning points in the novel, many of which involve religion, churches, our relationship to God and importantly, what, why and how to pray. At one point in the novel, Huck is in trouble once again with Miss Watson because of his "ornery ways". Miss Watson suffers under a rigid view of faith and intends that Huck must be saved. She takes Huck in a closet, forces him to kneel and tells him that he will receive anything he prays for.

It's at that point that Huck demonstrates the all too human qualities we show when presented with such a claim for prayer: taking Miss Watson at her literal word, Huck prays for a fishing line and some fishhooks. No big deal. Later, he does find the fishing line but never the hooks, leaving Huck even more skeptical about the nature of prayer. Do we really get what we pray for? Huck expects a material answer on his terms that has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit let alone God.

Doesn't that sound like the nature of most prayers you've heard uttered? What do people pray for? For many, people pray like Huck, asking for material blessings, blessings that are completely narrowed to the mind and heart of the person asking. There are several problems with these materialistic prayers not least among them is the one that Paul writes about this morning in Romans—we want to pray to be sure, but we are swamped by our worldly cares and concerns. We are lost in our "wants" and desires, having no good idea of what there is about prayer that will bring us real hope.

How does this focusing on "wants" kind of praying come to pass? I suspect chiefly because we have been led to believe that prayer is up to our individual initiative—that prayer and praying must come first from our own hearts and minds.

This human centered focus applies to much of what many people regard as faith, that prayer, like faith, is an entirely personal and individual undertaking. Want to be a believer? Then it's up to you. Do you want to be a person of prayer? That prayer must start with you, in your mind, in your heart. Huck is led to believe this by Miss Watson but in the process, he discovers that thinking prayer is entirely up to us, we can be deceived, or believe we can deceive. Huck prays that God will help him to return the runaway slave, Jim, to his owners but he can't really pray that prayer, at least in honesty. Huck goes on to say it's impossible to pray a lie; Huck doesn't want to return Jim at all and declares on reflection, that he never will even if he must go to hell, according to Miss Watson's faith.

Saint Paul offers an entirely opposite picture of prayer in the letter to the Romans. Just sentences earlier, Paul has shown us that faith is not a matter of following rules or laws. Instead, faith is trusting in Christ, in God and in the Holy Spirit. And at this point, Paul goes on to say that while we may be too weak on our own to be the faithful people we want to be, God in the Holy Spirit is not. God and the Spirit, like Christ, are strong for us. And here comes one of the most profound and welcome promises in the entire New Testament—we may not be able to pray as we ought if we rely only on ourselves. But the Spirit who comes to us with the most profound care for us, with sighs too deep for words, that Spirit teaches us to pray. More than that, the God who created us, who searches our hearts night after night, knows the Spirit and that Spirit, intercedes on our behalf. In other words, when we are dry and empty of prayer except for "wants," God comes to us with prayer. Or to put it in the plainest language, God leads us to true prayer, and it starts with the Trinity. We need not rely on ourselves alone as we can rely on a God who knows us so deeply, with sighs too deep for words, a God who initiates the conversation of prayer, not we ourselves. Humanity doesn't need to manufacture faith or create prayers as God has already taught us how to pray, long before we knew or understood what we needed.

On this day of Pentecost, much of the church focuses on the miracle of tongues, the Spirit appearing like tongues of fire above the Christians' heads. That Spirit leads each person to speak a word of Christ in a language the world needs to hear. And yes, that's a miracle to be celebrated and welcomed. But as you can hear, an equally important miracle is that the Spirit comes for us, even before we know what we need. The Spirit knows we need a community, a body of people, and that same Spirit who searches our hearts night after night, gave us the church to strengthen our hearts, our prayers, and our eternal hope. Amen.

The Rev. Jeff Bullock

