

Too Deep for Words

The Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle

July 27, 2014

If God is for us, who is against us? (Rom. 8:31)

Such abundance! How shall we focus our conversation this morning? If ever we needed a reminder of the depth, and beauty, and richness, and relevance of Scripture this morning's lectionary selections provide overwhelming evidence! From the Hebrew Scripture we have this story of intrigue from Genesis that is such a colorful illustration of what "goes around comes around" as Jacob seems to meet his match in Uncle Laban! Matthew peppers us with a series of similes or analogies that help us understand the kingdom of heaven and its awesome power. Is this a kingdom that might be experienced here on earth or only in the afterlife? And lastly we have this excerpt from Paul's letter to the church in Rome, his great treatise, regarded by many as the most theologically influential document in Scripture. These few verses cover a range of topics each of which merit a full semester at seminary! The nature of prayer; hope; judgment; forgiveness; predestination; justification; obedience; God's elect; the mind of God; and it closes with those reassuring words that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Such abundance! Where to focus?

I wonder if there is a more important topic than prayer or interestingly, a topic that rouses more uncertainty. So let's focus on those things related to prayer and how it binds us to God with unbreakable bonds. As the quote from Martin Luther on the front of this morning's order of service says, "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing." As but one example, the fundamental element of worship each Sunday is prayer. We pray at least four times – seven if you rightly include hymns – including the prayer that Jesus taught his Disciples to pray.

Paul confirms our fear that we do not know how to pray as we ought. But, he tells us we needn't worry, the Spirit helps us in this weakness; the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. This is a recurring theme in Scripture. Last week you may remember we looked at Psalm 139 in our reflections on Jacob's ladder. The psalmist said God knows our inmost thoughts and "even before a word is on my tongue, the Lord knows it completely." (Psalm 139:4) God is our keeper and will find a way to communicate if we are but open to his word. God speaks to us through the Spirit and through Scripture and if we are obedient; if we are trusting, we are moved to respond with thanksgiving and to seek God's guidance in all that we do.

This points us to another important theme that runs throughout this epistle and is front and center in this morning's reading. Scripture is not so much a theology as a story; the story of God the Creator in humankind's evolving, often disobedient relationship with God. Scripture is filled with verbs of action and nearly all of the verbs in this morning's reading involve God reaching out to us. The Spirit helps us; the Spirit intercedes; God searches our hearts; God calls us according to his purpose; he calls, justifies, and glorifies. And lastly, superseding by a factor beyond our ability to comprehend, God gives his only son. He did not require that of Abraham nor anyone else in his creation but in his undying love for humankind, Christ came to show us how to live; to show us a better way. As Paul puts it: "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (v. 32) How do we respond to such a God as that?! Why do we so often fail to trust and obey a God such as that?

So how should we think of prayer? Easton's Bible Dictionary says that prayer: "is converse with God; the intercourse of the soul with God, not in contemplation or meditation, but in direct address to him. Prayer may be oral or mental, occasional or constant, ejaculatory or formal." Prayer is conversation and conversation requires more than one party. Prayer is dialogue not monolog.

I have had conversations with a number of you about prayer. You are a congregation that believes in the importance (efficacy) of prayer. On occasion, some of you have experienced the confusion, disappointment, and despair that come from unanswered prayer. I know several of you have incorporated formal prayer into your everyday routine – just like brushing your teeth or getting dressed for the day. Some of you have prayed so intensely that you felt "prayed out"; that your words had become empty and devoid of meaning. Paul seems to be reflecting on a similar experience when he offers the assurance (v. 26) that at those dispiriting moments the very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. What N.T. Wright describes as "prayer beyond prayer, diving down into the cold, dark depths beyond human sight or knowing." These are places where only the Creator who "knit us together in our mother's womb; who fearfully and wonderfully made us", can see. As the Psalmist pleaded last week: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts." (Psalm 139:23)

One lesson we can draw is the importance of prayer is not so much the words we use or even what we pray about. The real importance is that we open our hearts – reveal our souls – to God; that we willingly offer our inmost thoughts; that we ask God's guidance, his support as we make our way on life's journey. To enter into an ongoing conversation with our Creator is to share the heaviness of life; to accept the yoke Jesus offers as we remember him whenever we celebrate the Eucharist.

There are any number of reasons why we do not know how to pray as we ought. As William Barclay points out, one of the more obvious reasons is that we cannot foresee the future. As Barclay puts it we cannot see a year or even an hour ahead; and we

may well pray to be saved from things which are for our good, and we may well pray for things which would be to our ultimate harm simply because we cannot see ahead and know what is to happen.

We should be grateful that we have not been burdened with knowledge of the future. But Paul also tells us that "all things work together for the good of those who love God". All things work together for the good of all. . . Could that mean that in considering my individual prayer that God also factors in the needs of others?! Am I the only one that needs reminding that while I may be very important in God's eyes, I am not God's only consideration every time I lift my voice in prayer?

So we cannot know the future and we cannot know the impact our prayer might have on others and consequently on God's broader purpose. What we pray for ourselves or for others will have an impact on others beyond our ability to comprehend. Some of you may be familiar with the so-called "butterfly effect". This is the physicist's poetic attempt to explain chaos, the sensitivity of one event to another; the effect that a butterfly can have on the path of a tornado weeks later. Thirdly we might say that we don't even know our own groanings clearly enough to put them into words. We may think we understand our needs but too often we confuse the values of society and our true innermost needs.

There was an excellent article in last Sunday's Times Magazine entitled *Love People, Not Pleasure*, by Arthur C. Brooks (NYTimes, July 20, 2014). The article examined what makes us truly happy or perhaps more accurately the things that make our happiness greater than our unhappiness. Citing research from the University of Rochester, the author points to the goals we set for ourselves in life. Brooks broadly defines these goals as "intrinsic" and "extrinsic". Intrinsic goals might include helping others, valuing enduring relationships, focusing beyond one's self. Extrinsic goals would include public fame or recognition and the means of achieving that such as excessive wealth. For our purposes this morning we might say, somewhat simplistically, God's goals and Society's goals. The reassuring news is that even if we don't understand the difference, God does and

the Spirit intercedes in our best interests. What sometimes *seems* to be unanswered prayer might be better described as well-answered prayer.

Recently I visited someone that I've known for nearly 40 years. Approaching 90, she is practically homebound except for visits to the doctor. I often refer to her as my New York, Jewish mother. Sonja is a rather extraordinary woman who has touched the lives of people around the world through her paintings and her spirituality. She is a secular Jew whose family escaped Europe in the late 1930s when she was a school-age girl. Sonja was blessed with beauty and intellect and quotes Bhagwan, the Buddha, Maimonides, Lao'tsu and Jesus with equal ease. When she was in her late 20s, her older son contracted leukemia and died. Needless to say she was devastated and was bedridden for long periods over the next several years. At some point her younger son gave her a box of watercolors and suggested that she try to paint; "Maybe it will make you feel better mommy", he said.

Sonja takes no credit for the thousands of drawings, collages, and paintings many of which have been shown in galleries across Europe and the United States. She understands herself to be a conduit for an expressive power she calls God. She understands this to be a great gift – one that could not have been received had her older son not suffered his tragic death. It took Sonja more than a decade to understand the connection between her son's death and the continuous outpouring of artistic expression that resulted. She could not have known God's plan for her and even if she had, it is unimaginable that she would have prayed to actualize the gift she had been given.

Sonja has been beset most of her life by a series of ailments that rival Job's but through it all her creative output has never been stymied for long. On my last visit she showed me a dozen or so recent works done in various colors of India ink. With sighs too deep for words she has given thanks for her artistic and spiritual gifts. She has been a source of great comfort for many with her art, her friendship and her genuine wonder of the power of the Spirit of God.

Before we close I'd like to take a quick look at what Paul says about the post-resurrection Jesus. Recall with me these words from the Apostles' Creed: "the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." My mind's eye imagines a judge in a long black robe wearing a powdered wig addressing the accused who is sitting in a bulletproof glass enclosure. It is an image that underscores the imbalance in power between those judging and those being judged. Is this the image the early church fathers had in mind as they tried to formulate this earliest of creeds?

But Paul seems to offer a different understanding; one that is far more comforting; an image of someone to whom we'd much rather pray for forgiveness. Paul suggests that Jesus sits on God's right hand not so much to judge as to act as our intercessor; our defense attorney. Jesus, who dwelt among humankind, exposed to all the temptations and privations of earthly existence, has been assigned to be our counselor; to defend us on judgment day?! What a remarkable notion! That as we confess to Almighty God the things we ought not to have done and the things left undone, Jesus is there to intercede for us?! As the Psalmist might say, these words are too wonderful for us to hear!

Open your soul to the God who searches the heart, who knows your inmost needs; trust in your Creator that your prayer will be *well* answered, that all things may work together for the good of all according to God's purpose.

If the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words; if Christ Jesus resides in heaven to intercede on our behalf; "If God is for us," who or what could possibly separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?

Who indeed?!

Amen