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Romans 8:26-39

30 August 2020

Sermon

“It will happen again and again that the person who is charged with offering the prayer for the fellowship will not feel at all in the spiritual mood to do so, and will much prefer to turn over their task to another for this day. Such a shift is not advisable, however. Otherwise, the prayer of the fellowship will too easily be governed by moods which have nothing to do with spiritual life. It is precisely when a person, who is borne down by inner emptiness and weariness or a sense of personal unworthiness, feels that they would like to withdraw from their task, that they should learn what it means to have a duty to perform in the fellowship, and the body should support them in their weakness, in their inability to pray. Perhaps it is right here that one will realize the profound truth of Paul’s words [from Romans 8:26]: ‘We know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.’ Everything depends on the fellowship’s understanding and supporting and praying the person’s prayer with them as its prayer.”

As you may suspect if you’ve been following our series... these are the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer from his work *Life Together*, speaking on the importance of praying together and on how prayer builds up not just the body as a whole, but individuals within, notably here, it’s leader or pastor. I bring this reading before us today for 2 reasons, the first being that we will be discussing Prayer as part of the Faith Communities life today, and 2nd, I frankly don’t feel like praying and preaching at all today, and good ole’ Bonhoeffer is pretty much burning my ears up with this quote.

Why don’t I feel like praying or preaching this week? I don’t know... if I knew, I’d have fixed it by now. I can guess it’s a number of things... the idea of my cancer coming back, even if all the signs are good... the looming threat of COVID-19 everywhere outside my door... the waning endurance required to survive such physical and social isolation... just plain good ole fashioned stress... and that constant inner dialogue that says I’m never doing enough... that’s just a handful of things off the top of my head. I’m guessing we all have our own burden’s right now and I doubt I’m the only one who feels like just not working or doing anything. Maybe its text book depression and mental health issues, maybe its spiritual hibernation or just physical tiredness.

Now, I’m getting into all this for a reason, and that’s not to garner some kind of support for me personally (though that is always welcome, obviously). I’m hoping that my reflection will serve as an illustration for what you and others are also feeling. And to highlight the need we all have, be you pastor or congregant, be you young in the faith or mature, to be held up by our community of fellow believers. And the practice we use to hold each other up is prayer.

Our friend Bonhoeffer would break prayer into two parts, each one feeding the other. Prayer done with others and Prayer done alone.

How shall we pray alone and why? “Pray on the basis of a word of Scripture. In this way we shall not become the victims of our own emptiness. Prayer means nothing else but the readiness and willingness to receive and appropriate the Word, and, what is more, to accept it in one’s personal situation, particular tasks, decisions, sins, and temptations. [...] According to a word of Scripture we pray for the clarification of our day, for preservation from sin, for growth in sanctification, for faithfulness and strength in our work. And we may be certain that our prayer will be heard, because it is a response to God’s Word and promise.”

Bonhoeffer very wisely suggests that when we pray alone, we use scripture as our guide. We do that so that our own mood, our own faults, our own emptiness as he calls it, don’t get in the way. It’s a barrier I’m all too familiar with. I have studied and continue to study the Scriptures, I KNOW about God but that doesn’t mean I always feel the connection. There are so many things in life that separate, distance, and alienate us... we hit a barricade as Professor Heather Murray Elkins of Drew University would describe, “We cannot cross [this barrier], of our own will, all that divides us from those we love or love us, and this includes God. We are stopped at the barricade of suffering or sin and fall silent. There are no words [of our own] for the crossing.”

Thus we should trust in the WORD of God by praying with the WORD of God. That means praying using literal words from the Bible, but it also means praying in the spirit of the Living Word, who is Jesus Christ. And this is made possible by the Holy Spirit, that helper sent to us and among us. “The Spirit helps us in our weakness.” Paul reminds us. That means prayers can be recitations of scripture, they can be guided by scripture, they can be free prayer that is aimed to be with Christ. But it must be practiced and even “the poorest mumbling utterance [in earnest faith in Christ] can be better than the best-formulated prayer.” (Bonhoeffer)

So, in my weakness, my reluctance to even be doing this right now, in the emptiness I feel in the moment, in the recognition of my own unworthiness alone but having been made worthy in Christ, I’ll pray alone.

“Holy Spirit... help me in my weakness, for I do not know what to do or say. Take my sighs of pain and intercede, making them your words that are beyond my own imagination. Search my heart, O God, know me and know my will, make it your will. Take me and work all things I do for good, not for myself but for all you have called and died for. You have, through Jesus Christ, chosen all persons, even me, to be your children in a large family. Thank you Almighty God, for you have called me and justified me in your glory. Amen.”

It’s a bit odd to be praying in the middle of a sermon for help with said sermon and prayer... but life and death, height and depth are nothing for God, a little time, past; present; or future, will not hold back that power either.

The prayer alone is vital for us who are Christians. It is the main line of communication between our own spiritual self and God. Relationships require communication... Are you communicating with God? How are you going to trust, have faith in Jesus Christ, if you are not talking? I'll freely admit, I need to talk to God more. But there is another part of prayer we must practice, the prayers we do together.

So much of our last few weeks has been building up to this, as we reflected on the nature of who we are to God, and each other, in the community of faith. That we are believers, sinners forgiven, guided by the word and suffering in Christ together... through all of that, we are enabled to be connected by the power of the Holy Spirit. So we must take our prayers and connect them, directing some prayers alone to others and then praying together for the whole.

In the church, we call these prayers for others intercessions. You might be most familiar with it as "The Prayers of the People" which we do every week after the sermon and responsive hymn. This regular communal prayer serves as a service we do together for each other and the world. It is not the least thing we do in worship, it's perhaps the most. Bonhoeffer would explain it as follows: "A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a person for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble they cause me. Their face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a person for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner. [...] Intercessory prayer is the purifying bath into which the individual and the fellowship must enter every day. The struggle we undergo with our family in intercession may be a hard one, but that struggle has the promise that it will gain its goal."

We pray for each other, our friends and enemies, because that is the tie that binds us. God bound us together in creation as those made in God's image, Christ binds us in his blood washing our sins, and the Holy Spirit binds us as one body through prayer. It is the prayer alone that builds the body and it is the prayer together that builds the individual. I cannot be the pastor, I cannot be a believer, if I am not talking to God, communicating and interceding for others, you, the church I am called to look after... and the church cannot be the Body of Christ unless it is in turn building up its members and leaders. I am able to preach only because you pray for me and God acts on those prayers. You are able to go and work, to care for your family, to do more miracles than we can imagine because the church prays for you. And the church exists because you are praying for it.

All this is possible because of God's grace and love. "If God is for us, who is against us?" Paul comes to the climax of perhaps the entire New Testament in these verses. It's a love song and this is the great declaration of undying love for us.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² 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? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.^(w) ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ 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.

Nothing you do will separate God from you... you might not be praying and talking to God right now, but God did not leave, did not go away or stop trying to talk to you. God has not stopped talking to us the Church, the community is not separated from God's love just because we can't be in the building. Whatever the funk I'm in at this present time that's got me hung up, does not remove me from God's love, it does not leave. And our prayers, alone and together, push me back, hold me up, and keep me doing my duty because it reassures me of the promise that God is there. I'm praying for you in this time, that no matter the barrier that is blocking you from living fully, you will feel the support of your community, your church, your family in Christ... we are praying for you, the Holy Spirit is moving and will deliver you across all barriers in your life just as surely as it has delivered me to the end of this sermon.

Amen.