

Sermon for Sunday, December 30, 1979, by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"HUGGING GOD WITH ONE ARM"

Romans 8:26-39

Text: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for saints according to the will of God. Romans 8:26-27

Do you have trouble praying? I suspect most of us do. It isn't that we don't believe in prayer or even that prayer isn't answered. As a matter of fact, if we took a vote on it this morning, I'm sure prayer would win by a landslide! Unfortunately, you don't pray by voting for it--you succeed at praying only when you do it.

Would you like some help in praying? That would be worth a lot, wouldn't it? Yet, that is precisely what our scripture for this morning offers us. The first thing the Bible tells us about praying is that there is someone to help us pray. St. Paul writes, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness..!" So right away we are introduced to God's help in our prayers. That Greek word for help is an interesting one. It is the same word used to describe a parent assisting an infant not yet able to support himself. It is the same word used when assisting a sick person who is too weak to help himself. John Calvin says it means to help in the sense that God gets under a burden with us and helps us to lift. Well, that's the kind of help I need! My resolve to pray is like a baby that can't walk by itself. My resolve to pray often is like a sick person too weak to walk alone. My resolve to pray becomes such a heavy burden that I cannot do it unless someone gets under the load and helps me lift. Is it that way with you about praying?

So that's the first promise the Bible gives us about praying. It says that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. I don't know about you, but that is the kind of help that I need. I'm grateful that when I pray, God's Spirit within me is helping me to pray.

Then the second thing the Bible tells us is that when we do not know how to pray, God's Spirit within us does. Yes, says the Bible, he intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. Well, that is an amazing revelation, isn't it? Do you ever have times when you don't know how to pray? I do. Just last week I visited with a family who had a new baby. The baby is seriously brain-damaged and is paralyzed from the waist down. If he lives, the doctor says he will be a vegetable. How do you pray at a time like that? Frankly, I don't know. I remember once having a little girl in the church I served thrown from her horse when the animal bolted. Her foot caught in the stirrup and as the horse ran her head was banged again and again against the hard ground. At the hospital the doctor said to me, "Hope she doesn't live. Her brain are literally scrambled." Then I saw the mother. "Pray for my little girl," she cried, "I don't want to lose her." Well, how do you pray at a time like that. In my profession there is so often times when we don't know what is right or best. What a relief it is to know that when I don't know how to pray, God's Spirit within me is interceding for us.

I'm sure there are many times when you don't know what to pray for either. So often we don't know what is the right thing or the best thing. And even when we think we know what is right for us or what we really want, it may not be so. And at a time like that, the only thing we can do is to trust God's Spirit within us to intercede for us. Yes, what a comfort it is to know that the God who is with me--the Holy Spirit--is praying to the God who is above me--the Father--and He knows what to pray and how to pray.

That brings me to the third thing about prayer that we learn from this passage. St. Paul writes that the Spirit intercedes for us. It helps when we pray to know that we have an interceder, an advocate, who is on our side and presenting our case before God. Do you remember where that idea first came from? It came from the lips of Jesus himself. He said, "I will pray the Father, and he will give you another counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit..." Phillips translates it this way, "he will give you someone to stand by you." That same Greek word is translated by various translators by the English words, counselor, comforter, advocate, someone to stand by you. It means someone who speaks in your behalf or who pleads your case for you.

Isn't that exciting? When we pray, God's Spirit is within us, praying with us, interceding for us as our advocate, our counselor, standing by us. But there is something else just as exciting. You see, the Bible also tells us (I John 2:1) that Jesus is our advocate, too. The Bible says, "if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ..." And then, over in Hebrews, we read, "Consequently (Jesus) is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them?" Then, in the passage we read this morning, we discover that Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for us.

Do you realize what that means? It means when I pray, God's Spirit in me is praying with me, pleading my case. But more than that, it means Jesus is standing right next to God and he is interceding for me, too. Would you pardon me if I just said, "Wow!?" Think of that! The Holy Spirit and Jesus both pleading my case when I pray! No wonder things begin to happen when people begin to pray! No wonder lives are blessed when people pray.

The fourth thing that St. Paul tells us about prayer in this passage of scripture is this: when we pray, God already knows what is in our hearts. Paul puts it this way, "and he who searches the hearts of men, knows what is in the mind of the Spirit..." Yes, even when we begin to pray, God has already searched our hearts. He knows what we are really thinking and feeling. Wasn't that what the Psalmist meant when he wrote, "Oh Lord, thou hast searched me and known me! Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up; thou discernest my thoughts from afar. Thou searchest out my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, lo, Oh, Lord, thou knowest it altogether." (Psalm 139:1-4)

You know, come to think of it, that idea isn't always comforting! It is a little disconcerting to realize that God already knows what I am thinking and what is in my heart! That means I can't fake my prayers with God. Do you ever try to do that? I know I do! I'll try to pray about some person or some thing and pretend to have the right attitude or right feeling about it. But deep down in my heart I don't really feel that way. I may feel angry or hostile or self-righteous or any number of bad feelings. I'm trying to learn to be honest in my prayers with God. I try to be honest and tell Him how I really feel and how I know I ought to feel. I ask him to help me deal with my bad feelings and I ask him to answer the prayer I know I ought to make.

I suspect that's something all of us need to learn. So, it is comforting in a way to know that as I pray, God has already searched my heart and He knows the truth about me. And that's a relief. It is a relief to know that God accepts me and loves me just as I am because he knows what is in my heart already. That means I can pray with all of my bad feelings and wrong attitudes and resentments because God already knows about them.

This brings me to the fifth thing that Paul teaches us about prayer in our scripture passage. He says, "...the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." Isn't that a relief? There I was, with all those bad feelings and all those wrong attitudes, praying maybe for the wrong things, but God's Spirit within me is praying for me according to the will of God. God has a will for your life--did you know that? God has a wonderful plan for your life. Many of us are out of God's will for our lives--we are out of God's plan for our lives. And do you know why? It is because we are not praying. You see, the Bible tells us that when we pray, the Holy Spirit within us intercedes for us according to God's will. Are you in God's will this morning? Are you living out the wonderful plan God has for your life? If not, it probably means you haven't been praying.

As we come to the end of a year, the end of a decade, what would you like to see happen in this church in the coming year, in the coming decade of the eighties? What would you like to see happen in your personal spiritual life, in your home, in the lives of your loved ones? If what happens is in God's will, if it is in God's wonderful plan for us, won't it be because we prayed?

Let me ask you quite frankly, do you think you will be in God's will and that you will experience God's plan for your life in 1980? To put the question another way, do you think you will be praying very much next year? And if not, why not? Do you think it will be because we don't love God enough--that we will be hugging him with just one arm?

You see, I don't think our problem is that we don't love God. I think our problem is we don't love him enough. Remember the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and wanted eternal life? Now, he loved the Lord. After all, the Bible says he had kept the commandments from his youth up. But he had only one arm around God. He had the other arm around his material possessions. Jesus had already said that a man couldn't have two masters--you really can't hug two people very well at the same time. So, he told the young man he had to decide who he would hug and if he really wanted to love God he had to get his arm from around his possessions. But he didn't want to do that. Jesus said we have to love God with all our hearts, all of our minds and all of our strength. But he wanted to hug God with one arm.

Do you remember falling in love? When I fell in love with Sydney I wanted to be with her every chance I got. I wanted to share my thoughts and deepest feelings with her. When I couldn't be with her I called her. The summer we were dating I had to go to a meeting in Switzerland and I would hate to tell you what my overseas phone bill was! And when I got back to America, do you think I hugged her with one arm?

So if you love somebody you are not a one armed hugger. Let me ask you again, do you love God? If so, you can't hug him with just one arm. God has given us so much to communicate with him--he gives us the Spirit to help us pray, he gives us the Spirit who knows what to pray, he gives us the Spirit to intercede for us along with Jesus, he knows what is in our hearts when we pray, and the Spirit prays for us according to the will of God. With all that help from God it ought to be easy to pray, don't you think? And when we pray we are in God's will and we experience his wonderful plan for our lives. The only problem is, none of those things will help and we won't be in God's will or know his plan for our lives if we hug him with just one arm.