

“Good News for Weak Knees”
Text: John 15:26-27; 16:4b-11; Romans 8:22-30
The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
May 31, 2009

*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not
know how to pray as we ought...Romans 8:26a*

I have preached close to 30 Pentecost sermons, but I cannot recall a single one in which I did not focus on the stirring account in the Book of Acts of God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the Christian Church. That passage is where our minds most quickly go when we hear the word “Pentecost,” which means, literally, 50 days after Passover. For the Hebrew people, Pentecost was their annual celebration of the wheat harvest. People would gather in Jerusalem for the festivities. On the most memorable of all Pentecost days, a series of unprecedented events occurred. “A sound like a rushing wind was heard, and it filled the house” where people from all over the world had come together. “Divided tongues, as of fire,” appeared above the people and “a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.” They were given the gifts of both speaking and understanding in languages that were not their own. (Acts 2:1-4) It was a mind-bending, spine-tingling experience, I would imagine. Luke, writer of Acts, presents us with a Pentecost that is the ecclesiastical equivalent of halftime at the Super Bowl, or fireworks night at Turner Field. Shouts of “Wow!” and “Holy Smoke!” and “Hallelujah!” would've been absolutely appropriate and welcome in church the day the church was born, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This Pentecost, however, I decided to forego the fireworks and instead to look at what John the writer of the Gospel, and particularly what Paul the Apostle have to say about the Holy Spirit. Yes, I did entertain the thought that 29 sermons on the same text were enough for me, but what really motivated me was the sense that there is more, so much more, to Pentecost and to the nature and work of the Holy Spirit than we usually hear.

John's Gospel has a great deal to say about the work of the Spirit. In his farewell address, Jesus speaks to his disciples, preparing them for his absence after his crucifixion. He tells them that once he has left this earth, the Spirit will come and will act as their “Advocate,” as “Intercessor” for them before God. The Spirit “will prove the world wrong about the nature of sin and righteousness and judgment.” (John 16:8) Jesus assures his disciples that the Holy Spirit will be their guide to the truth and that, though he will be gone, the Spirit will be present, continuing the work of revelation that Jesus himself had begun. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they too will be able to testify and to bear witness to the ongoing work of God in the world.

Are you beginning to see why, when we settle for wishing the church a simple Happy Birthday each year, we have perhaps shortchanged the occasion, and the deep, rich meaning of the spiritual reality that is the nature of God?

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul offers his own insights as to the work and meaning of the Holy Spirit. He is writing to a much broader circle of followers. Jesus has been crucified; he has been raised; he has ascended into heaven. Time has passed, and yet, the world seems much the same. The new creation, the reign of God promised by Jesus, has yet to arrive. Paul writes, "We know that the whole creation is groaning in labor pains up until now; and not only the created order, but we ourselves . . . groan inwardly." (If you've ever been in labor, you know what he means!) We are still waiting for complete renewal of the creation and of ourselves, but we seem to be the same old people, and the world seems to be the same old world. Oh, would that the promises would come true: that our bodies would be redeemed, that we would be fully included in the family circle of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. (Acts 8:22-24)

Don't get me wrong, I like vivid stories about wind and fire as much as the next person. But frankly, I am more interested in the day-in and day-out struggle in which I find myself, and in which I believe many people find themselves - of trying not to be discouraged, of fighting off frustration. It's wonderful to have High Holy Days and great peaks of spiritual experience, but we live on level ground. We live in a time when life is serving up lemons to a whole lot of people. How does God operate in situations of loss and bewilderment, when we cannot see, or feel, or hear, or touch anything that comes from the realm of the divine? I believe that the Bible can help us here. Last week, my eyes fell on the words: *The Spirit helps us in our weakness*. I thought, "Now that's it! That's the Word of the Lord for us today." I hope it is a word that you need to hear, that you can hear.

It's a dicey thing, being a preacher. I continue to work hard on the sermons that I share with you, but as the years have gone by, I have grown in my awareness that the sermons I preach are not really my sermons. The Holy Spirit is in charge of the entire situation. The sermons I preach, in the end, have little to do with me. I can testify to you from my own experience that "the Spirit helps me in my weakness". Sometimes the words that I expect will take you on a flight to great spiritual heights fall flat as a pancake. And then, there is the sermon that I felt did not come together, when I considered bringing a paper bag from the grocery store to put over my head - *It's time for church, but I'm not thrilled about what I have to say*. That will turn out to be the very sermon about which someone will say, "That message - it was just what I needed to hear." (1)

The operative power in what we are doing here now, you, as you listen and I, as I speak, is the power of the Spirit of the living God, "who helps us in our weakness".

Notice that Paul uses the first person plural pronoun. He includes himself in that great company of the flimsy, the fragile, and the frail. All of us, in fact, have times of weakness. Paul had them too. By the time he wrote Romans, he had become a prominent, respected, substantial Christian evangelist, but he had not begun that way. He had begun as a persecutor of Christians, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” until one day, approaching Damascus, he saw a light from heaven flashing around him, and God turned him inside out and upside down. Paul knew through experience about the life-giving power of God when he wrote, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness.”

One of my favorite books was written by a friend who died a few years ago, a wonderful pastor and preacher named John Claypool. The book, Tracks of a Fellow Struggler, is a series of the powerful sermons he preached as his daughter, Laura Lue, was fighting a valiant, but ultimately unsuccessful battle with leukemia. One Sunday, fresh from the hospital, Dr. Claypool stepped into the pulpit and spoke these words: “The hardest thing of all for me in the last two weeks has been my helplessness in the face of my daughter's suffering. All I could do was to stand there by the bed and give her a sip of water now and then. Rub her; reassure her, all of which seem so inadequate in the face of such an immensity.” (2)

“I have been tempted either to explode in a fit of rage or to dissolve into despair, but when I got down there, down at the bottom, I was given three gifts – the gift of patience, the gift of enduring, and the strength to walk and not faint.” (3) The Holy Spirit gave those gifts. Often, we see the Spirit's work only after the fact, but I love the thought that the Spirit is not only the giver and renewer of life, but when circumstances make you feel as weak as a noodle, the Spirit, Sustainer of life, will enable you to go on when, left on your own, you would collapse.

In this month's *Atlantic Magazine*, there is a marvelous article about what makes people happy. A study was done of the life stories of graduates of three classes of Harvard University - the classes of '42, '43 and '44. It is a fascinating study, which analyzes why some people are defeated completely by life, and others are able to survive whatever life dishes up. Why do some continue to thrive, even through great challenges? The study concludes that the chief question is not how much or how little trouble these men met in their lives, but rather how they responded to that trouble. (4)

The Apostle Paul would say that our first response ought to be trust - trust that the Holy Spirit is there and will hold us up when we cannot stand on our own. That's the key to survival.

Isaiah the Prophet wrote beautiful words that John Claypool often turned to in that losing battle against a vicious illness. “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.” (Isaiah 40:28-29)

Friday evening, Al and I had dinner with a friend who will be on his way Tuesday back to M.D. Anderson, the fine cancer hospital in Houston. Some of you have made that trip many times yourselves. Our friend is doing well after a daunting battle with cancer in recent months. As we sat at the dinner table, he reached into his back pocket and took his wallet out. From the wallet, he took a piece of paper, which he handed to me, asking, "Have you ever read this, Joanna? I read it at least three times a day." It was a short piece written in the 16th century by St. Francis de Sales, an expert in his day on matters of the Spirit –

Do not look forward to the changes and chances of life in fear. Look to them with the full hope that when changes and chances arise, God, whose you are, will deliver you. Hold fast to God's hand, trusting that when you cannot stand, God will bear you in his arms. Either God will shield you from suffering or will give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace then, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations.

Wisdom to live by. Actually, I learned a bit of wisdom about life just recently from one of my favorite 21st century human beings, a little five-year-old named Charlie Adams, our grandson. He's had a rough time learning to swim, but about two weeks ago, he did it. He took the plunge, and now is swimming like a guppy, entirely at home in the water. What Charlie had to discover for himself was that the water would hold him up. Once he was able to trust the water to hold him, he was good to go. Not a bad way to think about the Spirit of God.

O Holy Spirit, Breath of Life, breathe life into me. But how about this? O Holy Spirit, Water of Life, hold me up, and hold me as your own.

Sometimes people call their pastors and share with them an anxiety. I've had people come to see me and say something like this: "I want to talk to you about my prayer life. I just don't feel I'm as spiritual as I need to be. I have a friend who goes to three prayer groups and belongs to four Bible studies. Me? I'm barely able to work in a quick blessing before dinner. What should I do?" It seems to me that such a question starts in the wrong place. The issue is not your spirituality. The issue is God's spirituality. God is Spirit, the power behind creation, the power beyond and behind the ongoing re-creation of the world, and of you and me. Even now, the Spirit of the living God is on the job, helping, supporting, confronting lies with truth, repairing downed communication lines among people and between God and you and me.

These passages today are rich and multi-faceted, and I commend them to you for deeper study, but I am going to draw this sermon to a close focusing on the end of the verse we have already begun: "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." Again, Paul acknowledges that he too is insecure about his prayer life. And aren't we all? Some of us don't even do it! We're afraid we might get it wrong. We doubt that it will do any good anyway. Sometimes we

fail to pray for the right thing and end up asking for the wrong thing. Dr. Robert Holland, a wonderful pastor, tells of going to visit a friend in the hospital. He was in a two-person room. The person in the other bed was quite elderly and in the last stages of a terminal illness. While he was visiting with his friend, the man's family came into the room. "They surrounded the bed, and began to pray aloud, weeping, pleading with the Lord to spare the man's life." Dr. Holland writes, "They prayed the wrong prayer. The right prayer would have been the prayer Jesus prayed on the night before his crucifixion. 'Nevertheless, not my will, but thy will be done'." (5)

Ah, prayer. Sometimes we expect God to intervene in some magical way, forgetting that prayer is never meant to be a substitute for our using all our human ability and ingenuity to solve problems at hand. If there are to be no more wars, for example, it will be because human beings have finally figured out the secret to peaceful coexistence. Through the power of the reconciling Spirit of God, it is now *possible* for us to figure it out. But we've got to do our part, too. Never let prayer be a substitute for action. I love this old question: If you were drowning, would you rather look on the shore and see a bishop praying for you, or a burglar who could swim, getting into the water? (6)

I would never hold myself up as an example of perfect prayer, but my prayer life did improve considerably a few years ago after I heard a friend say that when he began to pray, he asked himself, "I wonder what is really bothering God today when God looks at the world?" Then, he was able to "pray as he ought".

One of the most important things about prayer, which we often forget, is that sometimes our job is simply to hush up and listen, trusting that the Spirit knows how to get deep down inside of us, how to get our needs and our wishes through to the heart of God. God the Spirit and God the Creator are on the same wavelength. They are in fact, the same wavelength, and through the Spirit, the human heart, the will of God, and the mind of the Spirit all become one.

A few weeks ago, a woman named Martha Mason died. You probably never heard of her. She was 71 years old and lived in a small town in North Carolina. For 60 of her 71 years, she remained in an iron lung, as a consequence of polio, which struck when she was 11. There was a great obituary about Ms. Mason in the *New York Times*. I learned a lot as I read it, about how she chose to remain in the iron lung, for the freedom that it gave her. It "let her breathe without tubes in her throat, even as newer, smaller ventilators might have required." Because she never left the house, people came to see her. Doctors regularly, but all the neighbors would come too, and members of the local fire department to make sure her backup generator was working. Amid the rhythmic *swoosh swoosh* of her iron lung, the local book club met at her house. High school graduates dropped by, so she could admire them in their caps and gowns, as did just-married couples on their way to their honeymoon. Souvenir magnets from all over the world adorned the exterior of Ms. Mason's iron lung, like labels on a

steamer trunk.” Toward the end of her life, she obtained a voice-activated computer and began to write the story of her life, which was filled with many challenges in addition to the breathing situation. Her mother went crazy, but instead of letting her mother be taken away, she kept her at home. Martha took over running the household and arranging for her mother's care. Year after year, she worked on her book. “There, in her childhood home with a microphone at her mouth, and the music of the iron lung for company, she wrote her life story, sentence by sentence, in her soft, Southern voice, with her own breath.”

What a testimony to human dignity and courage.

What a wonderful way to think about the Spirit of God, who breathed life into us in the first place and gives us the wherewithal to live “holy and joyful lives” day by day. (7)

All thanks and praise to God, the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer.
Amen.

(1) William H. Willimon helped me with this reflection on preaching in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 37, year B, April, May, and June, 2009.

(2) 1974, Word Inc., p.55-57.

(3) Claypool quoting Joseph Pieper.

(4) *The Atlantic*, “What Makes us Happy?” Joshua Wolf Shenk, June, 2009.

(5) From a sermon preached by Dr. Robert C. Holland, in the Shadyside Presbyterian Church, Pittsburg, PA, 4/13/1980.

(6) Ibid.

(7) Brief Statement PC(USA).