

Sermon – 8th Pentecost

Romans 8:26-39

July 30, 2017

“What Was That You Said?”

It's rather painful for me to listen to the sound of my voice, or watch myself on video. I may get a kick out of watching an old home movie when I was 6 playing baseball in the backyard pretending I played for the Minnesota Twins. I would imagine myself getting the big hit or making a game saving catch. Sometimes I would even do my own play by play and be my own cheering section, creating fan noise when I pulled off said big play or so my mother listening from the kitchen window would claim. Ok, I was an odd kid! But aside from old 16 mm movies which would take me back to what might have been but never was, I'd do just about anything to avoid having to watch myself on film or hear my voice on tape.

So the thought of what my prayers sound like to God is quite un-nerving. In Romans 8:28-39 Paul declares the faithfulness of God as forthrightly as he had described humanity's dire predicament. Romans 8 conclude with some of the biggest promises in the Bible - the love of God for creation is unyielding. Nothing gets in its way. Paul gets there - to this promise that God is constantly working - wringing out good from a world saturated by sin and beleaguered by suffering, all the while patiently shaping sinners into the likeness of Jesus - by way of two largely inconspicuous sentences on prayer.

Romans 8:26-27 serves as the hub around which the message of Romans now turns. Yes, humans are weak – but not helpless. Our prayers – an extension of our faith - may seem meager, but when we pray we quite literally pair ourselves with God the Spirit, who Paul calls “*the Searcher of Hearts*” – our groans and squeals become powerful appeals to God. When we pray we join the groaning of all creation, even the groaning of Christ for the world in love he died for. Still, the thought of my prayers being on some sort of transcript makes me shudder. I can imagine the good Lord sitting me down for an after dinner home movie night and cuing up a few old reels - under the caption “*Heaven's Funniest Prayer Videos*”! In such a scenario I'd volunteer for dishes duty real quick – and for good measure giving the silver set a good polishing.

But what if the show begins anyway before I can excuse myself...and the first sound out of my mouth....is perfect! What if I was not only earnest, but humble and attentive to God's response? What if I showed surprising concern for my two older siblings, which I almost never did growing up?! What if I really hurt inside when I prayed for the poor or the grieving? What if I was righteously angry at those who hurt or exploited vulnerable people? What if I pleaded for Christians who were persecuted for their faith? What if I prayed forthrightly for leaders in government, regardless of whether I shared their views asking God to cleanse them of pride and love of power? What if I prayed for the church, so divided - that it might be united in faith and fellowship like Jesus prayed the night he died for her?

What if I prayed for the friend indifferent to the claims of Christ or the family member who had renounced their faith or church members who had drifted from the congregation, never once expressing concern for a missing offering – just a missing brother in the faith? What if? And what if above all, I spent generous time simply praising God for who he was and what he meant to me and all the while never asking of him one single thing? What if when I did get around to requests in prayer I didn’t utter one of them till I thanked God for the ones he’d already supplied? What if in closing in the name of Jesus every time that name seemed to linger on my lips like the sweetest tasting thing I’d ever had?

When my movie reel was over, and God put it quietly away, I’d be dead certain it was doctored like some “*You Tube*” video. How could my prayers all sound so much better than they actually were? Well, according to Romans 8:26-27, God the “*Searcher of Hearts*” simply listens for the faintest sound of faith - faith that would utter a prayer in the first place. The Holy Spirit takes what we who do not know how to pray as we ought and offers to heaven thoughts our limited minds do not yet comprehend with honesty and urgency our sinful hearts still do not allow. Romans 8:26-27 says we don’t even know *how* to pray for *what* we don’t know to pray for - a sobering picture were it not embedded in a message that could not be more enlivening. “Nothing” can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord - not imperfect prayers, not infrequent prayers, not even inane ones.

The message of Romans is plain enough, and Paul makes it pretty consistently in its first 8 chapters. You are I are not what we were intended by God to be nor even what we ourselves want to be. But Romans is also plain about this – God intended you to know your forgiver Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit believe against all your natural inclinations that God is “*for you*” because God did not spare his Son to have you. This is the good God is working for in you – to believe that your God is for you and that nothing will ever change that. I may not like the sound of my own voice - my many clumsy words are often not worth being heard. But the promise that nothing can ever separate me from the love of God, spoken with one perfect word – Jesus, is something the Holy Spirit can’t say to me enough. The next time you pray – listen first. Let the Holy Spirit say the words every one of us need to hear - nothing in all creation will ever separate you from Christ Jesus your Lord, and then let the Spirit help you with the praise such a promise requires, and no human word can ever adequately express. AMEN