

I suppose my first lessons in prayer came at bedtime when I was a child. Invariably, my mother prayed with me. I am deeply grateful. Moms and dads, pray with your children. Invariably, my mom and I made up the prayers out of our own heads and hearts. No Prayer Book lay on the nightstand. No Psalm from the Bible was ever read or said or sung.

Preachers I listened to, when I was a high school boy, reinforced this practice of spontaneous prayer. It still astounds me that someone I heard once could say something that not only stuck with me for years but also shaped my attitude for years.

Case in point. One preacher was preaching on Peter's attempt to walk on water at Jesus' invitation. The biblical revelation says that **when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"** – Matthew 14:30.

The preacher said, "That's how to pray." He drove his point home by saying, "Can you imagine Peter saying, 'O Lord, who sitteth upon the circle of the earth, before whom all the nations are as grasshoppers, with whom nothing is impossible, save me!?' No! He would have drowned. He got to the point. When you pray, get to the point."

He taught me to ridicule formal prayers. The only place I heard such prayers was in our Presbyterian church, so I sat in public worship and was critical of the formal prayers I heard there. Even the Lord's Prayer came under suspicion

Besides, Catholics used written prayers. Did anything more need to be said? Episcopalians and Lutherans used them too, but no one seemed to pay much attention to them in the Bible Belt of the Old South. Of anyone who used written prayers it was said or strongly implied that using them signified the presence of a dead religion. That conviction alone was enough to consign written prayers to the dustbin.

## Awakening

Given those assumptions, conscious and unconscious, I was scarcely prepared for reality. As adolescence with its intimations of infallibility and immortality, gave way to young manhood, I was surprised to kneel down in great anticipation, only to discover that I had nothing much to say to God, much less something spontaneous, Spirit-filled, and original. It wasn't always so, but it was disturbingly often the case.

I was learning the hard way the reality that scripture states as a matter of fact in the biblical revelation before us today. Romans 8:26 states this unwelcome fact: **We do not know how we ought to pray.** There was a time when I was critical of men in leadership, who did not pray in public when they had the chance. I do not do that any more. Their reticence may indicate a proper humility. They just don't know what to say, and it's better not to say anything. Guys like me who are expected to pray at the drop of a hat need to have the good sense to remember that we don't always know what to say; so keep it short. It's painful to learn how stupid you are about prayer. It can be even more painful to admit that weakness.

And when words fail time after time, the temptation is to stop praying altogether. Don't stop. Your admission that you are so spiritually bankrupt that you don't even know how to pray is the most hopeful sign of spiritual growth that you have had in years. I know that seems strange, but until you admit the truth about yourself, God will not force His goodness on you, and the truth in this case is that you don't know how to pray. So, be encouraged when you say, "I just don't know how to pray." I am hopeful for you. Don't

give up. Help is just around the corner.

### **The Holy Spirit and Prayer**

The promise of help brings us back to verse 26: **In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.** We should stop briefly to remove an obstacle that might be in your way. Older translations like the King James Version of the Bible referred to the Holy Spirit as the Holy Ghost. Many Christians don't take the Spirit any more seriously than a ghost story. If the whole idea seems foreign to you, here's a way to imagine it.

Think of the Church as one of the old sailing ships. They needed wind, if they were going to sail the seven seas. An old sailing ship was a majestic thing, but if the wind died, she was dead in the water. But when the wind picked up! Carole and I have enjoyed sailing on a 74-foot schooner in Annapolis. Of course it has a motor. But after the boat leaves the congested harbor, the skipper cuts the engine, and it is sheer joy to feel the wind fill the sails and move the boat across the Chesapeake Bay.

The Church is a sailing ship, and the Holy Spirit is the wind that fills her sails. The Church is a majestic thing, but when the wind of the Spirit dies, she sits dead in the water. Prayer fails. Music leaves you unmoved. Sermons are dust and ashes. God seems distant and beyond reach.

The biblical revelation at the beginning of verse 26 says that when prayer dies on your lips, and you never want to pray again, take heart. The wind will pick up. The Spirit will fill your sail again. He will help you in your weakness. God our Father and Friend helps us to pray. And how does He help us? Look at the rest of verse 26: **We do not know how we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.**

Now, I want you to take a deep breath and stay with me. We have to make a decision about how to understand the apostle when he says **the Spirit himself intercedes for us.** One way to understand it goes like this: the Holy Spirit speaks to God on our behalf, and we don't do anything.

The other way to understand it, which I accept, goes like this. George Yu is the architect who conceived and designed this sanctuary. People who know that will say, "BVBC is a George Yu church structure." But I never saw George Yu build a thing. He didn't fire a nail gun or hoist a steel beam. Workers of various kinds did all the labor, but George Yu's vision and design guided their hands.

The Holy Spirit is the one who conceives and designs how the Church prays. That's a good thing, because the end of verse 27 says that **the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.** But no one hears the Spirit pray. Pastors and teachers and parents and Christians of all kinds do all the praying, but the Holy Spirit's vision and design guides our praying. How does that happen?

Now, if I were your spiritual mentor, and three or four of us were sitting around a table with steaming coffee or hot chocolate and sticky buns, we would be engaged in a dynamic give and take to clarify or challenge what I have just said. If my comparisons worked and I reasoned clearly, the outcome of our give and take would be a sense on your part that you had just taken another step toward maturity in your knowledge of God and His ways with us.

Unfortunately, there are 300 of us here and no coffee, no hot chocolate, no sticky buns, and worst of all, no questions. I have to assume that my comparisons have worked, that I have reasoned clearly, and that you are ready to walk with me the next step toward

maturity in your knowledge of God and His ways with us. So, take another deep breath and stay with me.

This time I want to ask you a question. Who do you think would be able to discern best the Holy Spirit's vision and design for how the Church should pray? The answer starts in the scripture we reflected on last Sunday, Romans 8:5. **Those who live according to their sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires, but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.** God teaches the Church to pray according to His will, when Christians set their minds on what the Spirit desires.

Some people are just more attuned to what the Spirit desires, and they will learn best from Him how to pray. But they don't keep it to themselves. They help the rest of us to pray more in tune with God's will. Think about it this way. The Apostle wrote this letter to the Romans about 30 years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Almost 2000 years have passed. So, the Holy Spirit has been helping Christians to pray for almost 2000 years. The people most attuned to what the Spirit desires have learned best how to pray according to the will of God, and they have been sharing what they learned with the rest of the Church. The Church is a Fort Knox of spiritual treasures that can help the whole Church learn how to pray according to the will of God. We sometimes make it as difficult to access those treasures, as it is difficult to access the gold in Fort Knox.

### **Our Treasure Trove**

And that is why I'm glad that I made a detour between Syracuse, NY and Baltimore in 1972 to stop and visit my seminary friend, Ray Feeck. Ray was pastor of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Havertown, PA. We hadn't seen each other in six years, and it was good to catch up. He showed me around the church facility. As we walked through the sanctuary, I picked up this Book of Common Prayer. I asked if I could have a copy. He gave me this one, and I stepped into Fort Knox.

It was my introduction into the Church's two-millennium experience of prayer. In an unbroken chain from the New Testament to our own times the church has rendered the our yearnings for God into a collection of prayers that utilizes and transcends the Psalms, and by which the Spirit teaches every generation of believers to speak the language of our true homeland and unites us to the eternal purposes of God.

Something else, far removed from the Book of Common Prayer unmade the assumptions of my childhood about spontaneous prayer. I have prayed with fellow Christians week in and week out in the non-liturgical congregations I have served for five decades. I can't remember when I first noticed, but as I listened to people whom I loved pray, I began to recognize patterns. The people who prayed most faithfully and fervently were predictable in what they prayed. Familiar phrases recurred, punctuating the prayers we offered in our prayer meetings. I did not and I do not find fault with that. I did not and I would not try to change that.

But the cat was out of the Baptist bag. If people by nature express their aspirations for God in repeatable phrases and even whole sentences, might there not be expressions of spiritual aspirations from the past that we could imitate and learn from? From written prayers of the past we can learn from people who set their minds on what the Spirit desires better than we do. Also, this continuity with previous generations of godly men and women prevents a spiritual amnesia that causes us to think we have to learn

everything on our own.

### **On Our Knees**

So, what do we do with this astounding truth that the Holy Spirit has for 2000 years helped and still helps the Church in our weakness to pray according to the will of God? First, more important than the words we use in prayer is the act of praying. When we pray we say to God, “I need you. I yield to you. I trust you. I am partial and weak and sinful and at risk. You are my God and my Savior.” So, pray everyday, even if no words come to your lips. Pray with the Church every Sunday.

Second, nothing I have said means for a minute that we dispense with spontaneous prayer. The opposite has been true in my experience. The prayers of the Bible and the later prayers of the Church have given my faltering tongue words to utter in reverence to Almighty God. That experience has loosened my heart as well as my tongue. The spontaneous words that followed bear witness to a wonderful freedom in my spirit.

Third, C. S. Lewis once said, “I have a notion that what seem our worst prayers may be, in God’s eyes, our best. Those, I mean, which are least supported by devotional feeling.” (*Letters to Malcolm*, 117) It is simply not true that feeling good validates experience. Our feelings offer little help in measuring our spiritual maturity. I challenge you to stop living from one emotional high to the next. The habit of doing that is partly the outcome of the drug culture with its highs-on-demand. It is partly the outcome of television and movies, which always need something more exciting than last time to get us to watch or to buy something. It is a satanic cycle, and it produces in us ever-increasing desires for ever-diminishing pleasures. It is disastrous for spiritual life.

The right way to pray is to pray seeking God. If good feelings come (and they will), God be praised. If our feelings refuse us comfort (and they will), God be praised. It is armed with this truth that we are to war against the debilitating assumptions of our age.

Fourth, use written prayers. Read them, learn them, memorize, and reflect on them. Buy a *Book of Common Prayer* from Amazon.com. Google “prayer books” and see what you find. Read the Psalms. They are mostly prayers, very personal prayers. Personalize the Psalm or a phrase in the Psalm. You can see examples of how to do this from our Prayer before Preaching.

Don’t stop praying. If you’ve never started, start with the Lord’s Prayer and with three magnificent prayers in Ephesians and Colossians. The Spirit is at your side, and He will fill your sail, and together this magnificent old ship will sail on through the turbulent waters of our age.