

Walking in Prayer (Lent 3)
Romans 8:24-30
March 20, 2022
First Presbyterian, Luling

I realize that Daisy the schnauzer has recently—just two weeks ago—made an appearance in a sermon. She’s back today. Maybe she’s turning into our Lent mascot, we’ll have to see what happens next week. She’s back today, because though she understands a few words like walk, treat, ride, food, good girl, sit, and is generally a fairly intelligent dog, she has a significant gap in her understanding. She does not understand the word “no.” It’s not that she knows what it means and just ignores it. She really doesn’t understand “no.” It doesn’t register in her brain as a word that is directed to her. However, she does completely and fully understand this sound:

It’s my fault, really. I started making that sound as part of this sound: , when she was starting to get into something she shouldn’t have been into, when she was a puppy. I didn’t teach her no; I taught her this sound instead. I guess, to a dog, it sounds like it must be a word.

We all have sounds that aren’t really words—you couldn’t really spell that one if you tried, but we all have grunts and groans and sniffs that speak clearly, especially to the people who know us best. When we make those grunts and groans and sniffs, we know what we’re trying to communicate. We’re intentionally saying something. It could be “Pass the potatoes, please.” It could be “Leave me alone, I’m trying to take a nap.” It could be “I can’t believe she just said that. Let’s make our excuses and leave this party.” Or, “All is right with the world. My favorite people are here. My favorite beverage is in my hand, and I am content.” Right? You’ve said all those things without saying an identifiable word.

When I read this section of Romans, I hope that one verse stood out to you. I reference it frequently in our weekly prayers. Verse 26 and 27 say this: “Likewise 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. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

Sighs too deep for words. Sighs could also be groans. All those sounds we make to communicate—it turns out those sounds are also produced by the Holy Spirit.

But let’s back up a minute. This week’s theme of “walking in prayer” in our devotional starts off with these verses. Prayer is our companion throughout Lent. We talked about it just a few weeks ago, which David and I realized when we started to try to pick hymns.

I suspect it will not be news to you, nor shocking, nor surprising, if I say that sometimes prayer is hard. Am I just talking to myself? Can I concentrate for more than two minutes at a time? Can I pray while I’m doing something else—does that count? How does prayer work, anyway? Why doesn’t it seem like we ever get an answer? Do I always remember to pray for the people I’ve promised to pray for?

I hope I’m not the only one asking those questions. It’s difficult. And we don’t always pray faithfully. This passage has good news for us. “The Spirit helps us in our weakness.” Even when we aren’t doing a good job of praying, the Spirit is present, helping us when we falter. I’m quite thankful for that help.

“We don’t know how to pray as we ought,” Paul goes on. Hm. That’s different than just thinking we are not doing the best we could at prayer. We don’t know how to do it. We don’t know how we ought to pray. I don’t think Paul’s just talking about the mechanics. I think he means we don’t know what we’re supposed to be asking for. We’re muddled, confused, don’t know what the right thing might be. Our prayers are for complicated situations and competing goods. Sometimes it’s not so easy to know what the right thing to ask for is. And sometimes it’s even harder than that—it’s not that we don’t know which words to pick, it’s that our prayers don’t have any words at all. Maybe not even any of those grunts or groans or sighs that we use.

And then we get to my favorite phrase “that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” The Spirit doesn’t teach us to pray like we ought to. The Spirit doesn’t encourage us. The Spirit doesn’t empower us to pray on our own. The Spirit knows that we’ve reached the end of our abilities and resources. We just don’t know what to ask for or how to ask for it or what even we’re hoping for. And so the Spirit prays for us, on our behalf. That’s what intercede means. The Spirit just does it for us. That lifts a weight off my shoulders, I don’t know about yours. The Spirit just takes care of it. And doesn’t need words to do so. Those groans and sighs of the Spirit don’t need words to be heard and understood by God.

“The Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” That’s a big part of why we don’t know how to pray. Because we don’t know how our prayers might align—or not—with God’s will. But the Spirit knows. Whatever complicated situation, whatever complex and snarly problem, whatever hopeless cause, whatever desperate pleas, the Spirit knows the will of God and prays accordingly.

And God hears. God hears all those kinds of prayers, because Paul reminds us, God searches the heart. God hears straight from our hearts, God hears the Spirit’s intercessions. The devotions for the rest of the week each highlight a different kinds of prayers, and the different ways we pray. Praise and confession and lament and our own prayers of intercession. Prayers in individual voices and prayers we speak together. Prayers in hymns and songs. God hears.

God invites our prayers, God tells us to pray, God shows us how to pray, God enables us to pray. But it’s still so difficult that we can’t always manage. And then God prays for us. That’s good news.