

God's Greater Story: Holy Spirit, Our Intercessor

7th Sun. after Pent. – 7/19/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Romans 8:18-27 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 26, **“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”**

Introduction

✘ Thus far in this sermon series, Paul has led us to look at the big picture; the Greater Story of the presence and work of our Triune God. We've seen Christ, our Deliverer, rescuing us from our sin. We've seen God, our Father, claiming us as His children.

➔ And now today, we see God, the Holy Spirit and the way that He works in our lives. But to see the Holy Spirit requires that we look at things with a wider-angle lens.

✘ In Psalm 139:7, the psalmist, David asks, “Where shall I go from Your Spirit?” And then he meditates upon the places he might go. If he goes to the heights of heaven, God's Spirit is there. If he goes to the depths of Sheol, God's Spirit is there. If he goes to the farthest parts of the sea, God's Spirit guides him even there and holds him fast. And so it is that the Spirit of God overwhelms David so that he sees the Spirit every place he goes. And folks, that is still the way it is for God's people today.

➔ In Genesis 1:2, the Spirit of God hovers over the face of the waters. Yes, as time begins and creation takes shape, the Spirit is there.

➔ As the disciples gathered for prayer in a house in Jerusalem on Pentecost, the Spirit does more than just hover over the world; He descends into it, in a flash of flame and a mighty breath of wind. He fills men's mouths with speech they did not know before, and the hearts of those listening with wonder. He clothes God's people with power from on high and sends them forth in mission to the ends of the world. Yes, in the highest heavens you see the Spirit. In the farthest seas and in the lives of all believers you see the Spirit, ever at work.

I. A Moment Frozen in Time

✘ Today, as we contemplate Paul's letter to the Romans, I'd like to take you to one more place. Not the highest heavens; not the farthest seas. No, the place where I'd like to take you is a hallway; a hallway in Florence, Italy in the Galleria dell'Accademia. It's a place where voices are hushed and sounds are silenced. There is little to hear in this place, but oh, there is much to see.

➔ This hallway is part of a museum and, as you stand there, you are surrounded by four unfinished pieces of stone. It's as if time itself has been frozen. An artist was working but stopped for some reason in the middle of his work. We've placed a picture of one of them at the front of your bulletin (or Home Worship Material) today. The edges are rough; the stone is misshapen; yet, emerging from these blocks of stone are the beginnings of figures.

➔ Some have no faces. Others are missing arms, hands or feet. Yet you can clearly see the beginning of four figures. It's as if they are slaves; prisoners; begun by Michelangelo but never finished.

➔ What they once were – rough blocks of marble – is gone. What they will be – beautiful sculptures – is not yet here. Instead, we stand in the hallway in the midst of an awkward moment. The past is gone and yet not gone. The future is here and yet not here. As we look we can see the future, slowly taking shape, and yet the past is still painfully with us, locked in that stone.

- ✘ In our Bible text this morning, Paul invites us into a hallway much like this. He asks us to see how we too are caught right now in the middle of God's greater vision and work.
 - ➔ He begins in verse 18 by saying, "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us". Here we are in our own personal lives with suffering and glory held together in the same moment. It's obvious that our present world is filled with suffering; like rough hewn stone, isn't it?
- ✘ Originally God formed a beautiful creation. God's fingerprints were evident everywhere and it was beautiful and it was good. Yet Adam and Eve brought suffering into God's creation when they disobeyed God.
 - ➔ God promised in Genesis 2:17, "The day you eat of [the forbidden fruit], you shall die." Now God was obligated by His own Word to subject the beauty of creation to the bondage of decay. That punishment was set in stone for Adam; for Eve and everyone who would follow.
 - ➔ No one could free us...except God Himself. Only He could free His creatures and bring them into the glory He desired at the beginning. This is the glory that Paul has seen in Jesus Christ; a new creation and a way to eternal life. In Jesus, God has begun His work. Unlike Michelangelo's figures in stone, it is now only a matter of time before the full glory of God is revealed.
- ✘ So Paul writes to the Christians in Rome to help them stay strong in their painful moment. His words come to us as well to help us endure the suffering that we face here today.
 - ➔ As Paul told us last week, in Christ, we've been made into the children of God. This work is done; it is certain and sure. His death destroyed the power of sin for you and His resurrection brings you the promise of a new creation.
- ✘ But friends, what we are is not fully seen; not fully experienced here in this world. Just look closely at God's people. Paul says in verses 22-23 that you'll see people, imprisoned and suffering; groaning because they desire to be free. Look in the mirror and you'll see yourself suffering and groaning as well under the consequences of your own sinful and fallen state.

II. Our Situation

- ✘ So we all stand here today, awkwardly positioned between the sufferings of this present world and the glory yet to be revealed. It's in this place then that Paul asks us to consider seriously our own situation and to trust in the work of the Holy Spirit.
 - ➔ Looking closely at our situation though can be like looking at those figures in stone. Though each figure is unique in its own way, they're all still slaves; trapped in that unfinished stone and unable to get out.
- ✘ So it is for God's people. It's obvious the deep suffering among us here today. In America, Christianity used to be a strong cultural force; prayer was said in all public schools; at graduations and baccalaureate services led by ministers, which are now just a thing of the past. Nativity scenes used to be prominently displayed in every public square, but now the connection between Christianity and American culture is dying off.
 - ➔ A free expression of our faith is being pushed further and further away from public view. On the surface it looks like we Christians are losing strength; like our very survival is in question. Many wonder if God has abandoned us.
 - ➔ And some American Christians are confusing the power of God with the powers of this world. To them, the strength of God and His church depends upon whether or not America can still be called a "Christian nation". They ask in doubt, "How can we be God's people, the church, in a non-Christian nation?"

- ✘ Well, it is precisely to just such a situation that Paul's words offer us hope. Paul knew well what it meant to suffer as a Christian in this world. And he knew that in Rome, Christianity was not even a legally established religion.
 - There were far more barriers to those believers in Rome as they sought to express their faith. They worshipped the one and only God in a city that had many gods. They sought to publicly confess "Jesus is Lord" in a city that proclaimed "Caesar is Lord".
 - Christians worshipped a man, Jesus, whom the Romans said was associated with insurrection; who was publicly tried and condemned and crucified. So Christians were marginalized; pushed off to the side; forced to meet in small homes rather than huge and beautiful churches. They were, for the most part, slaves. And soon their persecution would become even worse and they would carry their dead under ground into caves and tunnels where they would be forced to hold worship services in the dark, in the place of the dead.
- ✘ But remember David's cry, "If I make my bed in Sheol" (that is the place of the dead) "You are there" (Ps. 139:8). When persecution shoves you into the darkness of death, into that place where you open your eyes but you cannot see God, Paul tells you, God is there!
 - Yes, the Spirit of God is there, in the darkest depths of your existence. Open your ears and you will hear Him. You'll hear the Spirit of God, crying out; crying out for you.
 - Paul says in verse 22 that the "whole creation" is groaning as it awaits the revelation of the sons of God and the new creation. So we groan as we're locked in persecution and the rejection of this world.

III. Trusting in the Work of the Spirit

- ✘ But Paul reveals something else as well. He opens our ears to hear one more groan; the groaning of the Spirit, interceding for you. He says in verses 26-27, "Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And He who searches hearts (that's the Father) knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God". Paul joins together the Spirit's groans with a glorious vision.
 - On the one hand, he says that the Spirit intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. We've all known times when we're at a loss for words. The suffering in this world; the longing for the new creation; it's all so strong and deep that we cannot find words to express it.
 - What do you say at a child's funeral? You stand there, next to the parents and your heart is filled with groans that words cannot express. What do you say when the doctor says the diagnosis is cancer? How do you respond when the death toll of a pandemic just keeps growing; when earthquakes, hurricanes, terrorist attacks and senseless violence never seem to stop?
 - Our sorrow is just too much; too deep to put into words. It's at moments like this that Paul asks us to listen; to hear the groaning. It's then that the Spirit takes our suffering and puts it into prayer before the Father on our behalf.
- ✘ But the groans of the Spirit are not just about suffering and sorrow. No, they are joined to glory as well; the glorious desires of God for you and me; for His people and all of creation.
 - One of the interesting things about Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures is how he approached carving those figures into stone. Michelangelo believed that, as an artist, his work was to liberate figures from the stone. He believed he was not carving figures into stone, but freeing them from the marble. Even though his work is unfinished, we can still catch a glimpse

of his larger vision in each of the unfinished works; his master plan. Michelangelo had the larger, glorious vision of these figures, but only through time and effort and the removal of stone, would that vision slowly come about.

✘ In a similar way, Paul talks about God's glorious vision seen by the Holy Spirit. When Paul says in verse 27 that "the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God", we see that the Spirit knows not only the deep mysteries of our suffering, but also the deep mysteries of God.

→ God's vision for you is that of a new creation; the new creation in Christ to which you've been joined in baptism. Through the Spirit, God is at work shaping your lives; forming your faith; working in small and sometimes painful ways as He continues to bring God's kingdom to its final fruition for you.

→ It's true, we cannot often see God's plan; His overall design. Sometimes, we can't even see the smallest carvings among us as He leads this world to that day of the new creation. But the Holy Spirit, who is our Comforter and Counselor; He knows the mind of God. He knows the suffering of God's people. And He joins both groans and glory for us into prayer before God's eternal throne of grace.

✘ So when you stand before God, frozen in time; living in this world and yet sure of the one to come; when you find yourself not sure how to put it all into words, know friends that the Spirit speaks for you. And trust His work because it is based in the certainty of God's love for you seen in the death and resurrection of His Son.

Conclusion: Living in Hope

✘ What I didn't tell you before about the hallway of the Galleria dell'Accademia is that it takes people from one place to another. And, at the end of the hallway, stands a work of remarkable beauty, Michelangelo's *David*; no longer a slave encased in stone, David now stands, in glorious freedom, the freedom of a man of God.

→ How much greater is that glory of David's son and David's Lord; our Lord, Jesus Christ who is Ruler of a new creation. It is in Him that God promises to bring all things to completion. Paul barely sees this, but he knows that it's there. And so he offers that hope to you and me here today; hope that lives and breathes through the prayers of the Spirit on our behalf.

→ Yes, Christianity may be losing its cultural power in America, but it will never lose its spiritual force. Our God is alive; He rules over all creation. He sees your life and He knows your suffering. And He has sent His Spirit to be here for you; whether it's at home, at work, as you're falling asleep or rising for labor. He is always with you, interceding for you according to the will of God. Amen.