

The Spirit helps us in our weakness.

11th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 12, Year A. July 27, 2008.

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. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. [Romans 8:26-28]

Most of us admire strong people. I'm not talking about physical strength – though we can be impressed by that. I'm talking about the strong character of people who stick to their principles and always do the right thing, no matter what (like an incorruptible New York City police detective who can't be tempted by money and really goes after the Mafia) ...and the dedication of people who won't allow themselves to be beat down by adversity, but keep coming back – ready to fight on (like the man who builds a great company, loses it in a financial disaster, then starts all over and builds a new one from scratch) ...and the strong leadership of people who can project such a courageous vision of the future that everyone else rallies behind them (like Winston Churchill in World War II).

I'm also talking about the strength of Christians like Mother Teresa who gave forty-plus years of her life in service to the poorest of the poor strictly out of love for Jesus, but in all those years received only a few fleeting moments of what we'd call "spiritual reward."

We admire strong characters. But if we're honest, we'll admit that *we're* not always strong. We're not often heroic. We admire strong people, and we'd like to be strong like them. But, in fact, most of us are weak more often than we're strong. We fall into temptation and compromise our principles, or our values, or even our faith.

When we have a scary diagnosis from the doctor, or if we lose our job, or if we lose a lot of money, we can plunge into depression. We look at what's happening in our life at times like that and despair. We say, "I can't take this anymore!" — "I don't have it in me." — "I wish I could just run away!" Or we beat ourselves up and say "If I had only done this instead of that!" Or "How could I have been so stupid?"

The apostle Paul, knew first-hand about rejection, failure, danger, and fear. He wrote: "*Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on journeys in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak?*" [2 Cor. 11:24-29]

He tells us today how he was able to cope with all that. He says, "*the Spirit helps us in our weakness.*"

When we're feeling strong, purposeful and self-reliant, totally in control of everything and confident that we can overcome every obstacle, we're pretty much shut off to the Spirit and operating strictly on *ego*. But when we have our back to the wall and feel empty and helpless – *that's* when we're open to God in a way we could never be otherwise.

Paul says there was a time when he was tormented by what he called "*a thorn in the flesh, an emissary from Satan.*" [2 Cor. 12:7-10] We don't know if this "thorn in the flesh" was a disease Paul had, or a difficult person who caused him trouble. He says he begged the Lord three times to deliver him from this situation, and God's answer was this: "*My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness.*" —GOD's power is manifested in OUR weakness.

"The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words."

There have been times in my life when I really didn't know how to pray. Life was just too confusing. Or I couldn't pray because I was just spiritually empty. (Yes, that happens to priests, too!) There are times when words of prayer fail us all, when we can't express the depth of our desire for the peace the world can't give. Paul says those are the times when "*We don't know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit prays within us with sighs that are more profound than words.*"

It's when we're weakest that we can, in fact, find ourselves closest to God—in the best position to be lifted up by the Spirit. Do you know what's the most effective prayer in our darkest moments? It's the *prayer of letting go*, when we stop trying to impose our will on the circumstances of life and start trusting that God is God, and that he holds us in the palm of his hand.

Admission of our weakness opens us to God. It also opens us to other people. When we're always in control, tough, strong, and sure we can handle everything, we make it impossible for anybody else to help us ...or even love us. But when we admit our weakness and need – and let the Spirit pray within us – God can bring people into our lives to help us. These people are the answer to the Spirit's wordless prayer rising from the deepest place of our soul.

We hear something else from Paul today; it's one of the most powerful verses in the whole Bible. If you've never memorized it, memorize it now! "*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*" Or, you can learn this abbreviated version, which works just as well: "*In all things God works for good for those who love him.*"

This doesn't mean that everything should be seen as being in some way "good." Obviously not. —It's in no way good that tornadoes ripped through nine New Hampshire towns on Friday and killed someone. It's not good that thousands of people are still suffering from the earthquake that hit China and the cyclone that hit Burma months ago. It's not good that people in Darfur are still afraid that government-backed raiders might swoop down and destroy their village.

"*In all things God works for good for those who love him*" is the assertion of a person who understands the ways of God. It's a proclamation of faith, the strongest proclamation anybody can ever make: "We know that in all things – all circumstances, even the terrible ones, even the frightening ones, even the evil ones – God works for good for those who love him, who have responded to his call." Paul says we "know" this to be true. We don't know it as a scientific certainty, *but as an article of faith* – forged in the fire of our own tribulation.

I like to say that "God takes the garbage of our lives and turns it into fertilizer," so that out of even awful events some good may come. But this requires our willingness to do two things. First: surrender ourselves to God in deliberate acts of submission and trust. And, yes, I said "acts." Plural. It takes more than one. The constant theme of our prayer needs to be: "Whatever may happen, dear God, I want not *my* will but *yours* to be done. I turn my life over to you and I trust you for the future, absolutely." And, second: let the Spirit of God lead us to reflect on our lives in such a way that we finally can see our experiences the way God sees them. Without the Spirit's help, we see just the surface of events. God wants us to see the deep reality.

People with such faith tell us about painful experiences, experiences that were impossible to understand at the moment – but through which they were later able to perceive that they had been given something else that was precious. With the Spirit's help they were able to ponder the darkest moments in life and see them from a perspective of faith, in the light of God.

This perspective of faith, with its confidence that for those who love him, God is at work for good in *all* things, is the secret of the Kingdom of Heaven.

For those who have discovered this precious pearl, this priceless treasure, every moment of closeness to God, every happy circumstance, and every joy — as well as every weakness, every failure, every sacrifice and every trouble — is being used by God to transform them into the likeness of Christ. And that's our destiny.