

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

When You Just Can't Pray Romans 8:26-27 and Acts 2

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This past Tuesday, I got to see the synchronous fireflies at Congaree National Park. Have y'all seen them? It's astonishing.

Now, what I'm not going to talk about is how almost every single park ranger, upon hearing my voice as I checked in at various points, refused to believe I was from Columbia. I guess they were keeping track of how far people traveled. I don't know. "Where are you from?" they asked. "Columbia," I said. "Are you sure?" they responded. "Yes . . . ?" But like I said, I'm not going to talk about that. That's a story for another day. What I *am* going to talk about is the undeniable sense of awe that descended upon me as night fell around us. Being surrounded by far more trees than there were people, being surrounded by trees that seemed to reach up into the stars, and then being surrounded by fireflies that seemed to bring the stars down to earth, blinking and flashing right in front of our eyes — I stood there, for a long stretch of time, staring all around me, making not a single sound. It was an undeniably holy moment, when I was unquestionably aware of the grandness and goodness of God. In response, I was stunned silent. If pressed, if absolutely pressed, I might have managed to say, "Wow."

Maybe you've heard of Anne Lamott, or read some of her writings. She's an insightful woman, a theologian without any formal training, who, I will warn you, paints her stories with colorful language. She has a way of cutting through a lot of heady talk about God and faith and prayer, and she says that prayer can be distilled down into three words. Every prayer, she says, is ultimately one of these: Help, Thanks, or Wow.

"Wow" would have been the best I could have done to find words last Tuesday night at Congaree. And I know that "thank you" might summarize a lot of prayers offered this Memorial Day weekend as you remember loved ones whose enduring legacy is one of sacrifice. I suspect, though, that most of us are more often rendered speechless, or near speechless, when the prayer we most need to pray is "help." When life has gone off the rails or the world seems to be spinning madly out of control. That's when the inability to pray adds insult to injury, or piles more guilt upon an already guilt-stricken soul, or makes God seem farther away than ever before.

"We don't know how to pray as we ought," Paul writes to the church. That pronoun is worth paying attention to. "**We** don't know how to pray," he writes. If you read much of Paul's prolific writing, you'll see quickly that he has no problem with the pronoun "you." "**You** should do this," he says often, or "**You** should not do this." He's not afraid to be very directive, but here he says, "**We** don't know how to pray." So if you have ever felt that way, regardless of the circumstances, I hope you will give yourself a measure of grace, for even Paul the apostle, Paul the defender of the faith, Paul who is credited with writing more of our sacred scripture than any other individual, even Paul sometimes does not know how to pray.

That, alone, is a helpful word, I think. But notice also what comes right before Paul's confession. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought." The Spirit helps us in our weakness. The Spirit **helps** us. The Spirit does not judge us, or mock us, or grow frustrated with us. The Spirit does not shame us, or abandon us, or weary of us. The Spirit helps us. This tracks with everything else we have heard of the Spirit throughout scripture, especially if you remember how John talks about the Spirit in his

gospel. In the middle of the section of John's gospel known as the Farewell Discourse, when Jesus is preparing his disciples for life after he is gone, he talks about how the Spirit will remain with them. And when he talks about that Spirit, he refers to it as the Advocate. An Advocate, in this sense, is a helper, a comforter, one who looks out for someone when they cannot look out for themselves, sometimes even someone who speaks for someone when they cannot speak for themselves. Someone who is close enough to the situation to know what needs to be said or done. The Spirit helps us in our weakness. The Spirit is our Advocate in all ways, assigned to our case by Jesus himself, meaning the Spirit, like Jesus himself, is not distant or far away or removed, but is right here, among us, as close as our next breath. That Spirit helps us when we do not know how to pray.

That Spirit is the same Spirit we heard about in Acts chapter 2. Acts 2 describes the day we have come to know as Pentecost. Grammatically, "pentecost" means "50th." We celebrate it 50 days after Easter. Theologically, what we're celebrating is the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and all those who were gathered with them. And as we heard John (Maynard) read, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

Will Willimon, a pastor and preacher and professor at Duke Divinity School, says that what happens in Acts 2 is "nothing short of a miracle." The Spirit blows through the house like a violent wind and dances on heads like tongues of fire, empowering people to speak as they have never spoken before, with an abundance of languages and vocabulary, an utter cacophony of linguistic prowess. But that same Spirit is also the one that steps in when every word available to us is inadequate, when no speech at all can express what is deepest within us, when all we can offer is an anguished howl or a heavy sigh. That, too, is nothing short of a miracle, is it not? Because the Spirit is with us always, but the Spirit has a habit of making herself known when we need it most, in whatever way we need most, even when we don't have the awareness of what to ask or the capacity to ask anything at all.

I may have shared this story with you before. When I was in high school, I played field hockey and I ran track. I was quite good at field hockey. I was quite not good at track. I ran track mainly to stay in shape, which meant I was never entered into races when it mattered most. That suited me just fine. But during one meet, there was an open spot in the two mile, and lo and behold, I was suddenly changing into my racing shoes. I don't know what happened. I'm tempted to say that everyone fast must have been out sick that day, because at around lap 6 of 8, I was in third place. By lap 7 of 8, I was in third place and fading fast, but shocked by the possibility of earning points for my team. As I came around the curve where coaches were permitted to cluster, I thought, "What advice will my coach give me? What strategy or technique or reminder will he bestow upon me to help me bring it home?" I strained my ears, and I heard him, all right. I heard my coach yell, "McDevitt, just . . . run faster!"

"Run faster." Brilliant advice. Why didn't I think of that? Because I was actually thinking, "You know, this is a good time to just ease up. Take a breather. Maybe even grab a cup of coffee." Run faster. With all due respect to my coach, those were some pretty dumb words. Over the years, though, I have come to realize: he didn't know what else to say. I think he was as surprised as I was by what was unfolding. So he said something dumb, something that in terms of content was the same as saying nothing at all. But the words weren't what mattered right then. He yelled out to me, not because he had anything eloquent to say but because he was making a connection.

And I suppose that's the best advice I can give you when it comes to praying when you don't know how to pray, or what to pray. Run faster. And by that I mean, try something. Say something to God. Say anything you can to God. Even if all you can do is borrow Anne Lamott's prayer: "Help." Even if all you can do is yell something that seems utterly inadequate or completely useless. Make a connection with God in whatever way you can. But I know there are times when you just can't, no matter how hard you try. When the worst happens. When the fear overwhelms. When the phone rings. When the doctor enters the room. When

the tragedy strikes. When the school is locked down. When the legal system seems to have lost not just its mind, but its soul as well. When the worst happens, when you have no words whatsoever, when you are working so hard to take your next breath, it's no wonder you can't form a single word. When those times come, remember that the Spirit helps you when you are at your weakest. Remember that the Spirit reaches out to grab your hand and prays to God on your behalf, because that's what an Advocate does. The Spirit knows the impossible, unformed words of our longing and cries out to God for us, not with language of her own, but with groaning and deep sighing, because some things really are too heavy for language to carry them. And because in those moments, the Spirit knows what the psalmist knew: that deep cries out to deep.

Paul Tillich, a German theologian who immigrated to the United States and taught at Union Seminary in New York City, Harvard Divinity School, and the University of Chicago, often reminded his students, "The transforming power of prayer is not in the prayer, or the pray-er. The transforming power of prayer is in the One who hears it."

Now, there is one brief caveat to offer here. The good news of a Spirit who prays for us when we cannot pray for ourselves ought not be mistaken as blanket permission to give up on prayer altogether, since, you know, someone else is taking care of that for us now. If anything, it should be the exact opposite. Knowing there is a God, knowing there is a Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all actively on our side, all actively caring for us in every conceivable way, all actively bringing us closer each day to the kingdom of heaven even when we can't see it, all actively doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves — that should be all more reason for us to fall to our knees in thanks and praise.

Because just a few verses after Paul reminds us what the Spirit is capable of doing, he reminds us of what God's love is capable of doing. God's love holds on to us and never lets go of us, which is, in some way, the answer to all of our most urgent prayers. So whether you've heard these words before, or whether you're hearing them for the first time, hear them today and hold them close:

"If God is for us, who or what could possibly be against us? For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor, I might add, the ability to pray, nor the need to sit in silence, nor faithful utterings, nor spiritual laryngitis, nor anything else in creation, nothing, absolutely nothing, will ever be able to separate us from the love of God."