

“With sighs too deep for words”

May 31, 2009

Text: Psalm 104:24-34, Romans 8:22-27

I.

As human beings—and particularly as Christians—we are, incurably, a people of hope. No matter how up or down we are in our spirit, there is always a *core* part of us that is hopeful—hopeful that things will get better, in whatever ways.

Hopeful that we’ll be healed, from whatever is ailing us; or that tomorrow will somehow be better than today. We’re a hopeful people ... hopeful that the economy will make a favorable turn, that our relationships will somehow work out and be more mutually enriching and satisfying; hopeful, that we’ll be happy one day.

In many ways, we’re a *one day* people, aren’t we? *One day*, I’ll be happy; *one day*, I’ll get the ideal job or life situation; *one day*, all the loose variables in my life will somehow work out. We’re this way, because we’re naturally—at least a part of us—a hopeful people. I believe that.

In spite of where we all fit in on the continuum of optimism vs. pessimism (is the glass half full or half empty?), there’s a life impulse in us that hopes for the best.

II.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day when the Spirit came upon the gathered faithful in Jerusalem. No matter how we break it down, it’s a day of mystery and wonder. But it’s also a day of hope.

It’s not like any of us *understands* Pentecost. It’s about the Spirit ... and the Spirit is always greater than our ability to define it. Still, when the Spirit comes, new life is born; there’s a new energy in the air.

When the Spirit comes, the creative hand of God is upon us and upon the world; and new hope and possibility rise up. We see this is the birth of our children; and at baptisms and weddings. The Spirit comes and touches us. We experience this is all of these *rites* of passage. We can’t explain it. But we know we’ve been touched.

Do you ever feel like you’re swimming up stream? Like, day after day, it’s one unsettling situation after another? Or, wherever you turn, doors seem to close. Or, every time you turn around, there’s a new family crisis to deal with.

III.

The Bible understands the human situation, and our reading from Romans 8 this morning particularly understands. The truth is, we get frustrated—that situations don't improve and get straightened out; that people don't act more like we want them to act; that people we love don't talk things through and communicate—that they don't see the BIG PICTURE, how things are inter-related, and figure out how to make better choices.

So much of our lives is about choices. But the Bible knows ... and Paul knows. Check Paul out in the first verses of our reading from Romans 8:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait to be redeemed.

In other words, we know our lives aren't perfect ... and that all around us, there's chaos and unevenness, greed and self-centeredness, sadness and sorrow ... regret and guilt and on and on.

Again, it's the human situation. And through it all, we're waiting—patiently, waiting—and hoping, that things will change.

And then, one day, it's Pentecost ... and the Spirit comes; in the wind and in tongues of fire, it comes—opening us to God's presence, that the Spirit might help us in our weakness.

Once again, Romans 8: *For we do not know how to pray as we ought, says Paul ...but that very Spirit intercedes ...with sighs too deep for words.* The sighs or groanings of the Spirit are part of the spirit's deeper yearning and longing for life and love—that we might be alive to the promises of God.

Tying this to Pentecost, *What the hope of Pentecost insists is that suffering does NOT have the final word.* Always, the Spirit is about giving life, and it's about giving hope and promise to our human situation. When you think of the Spirit, think of it as an opening of the future, as a bursting in to the burdens and the boredom of the present with new life and new energy for tomorrow.

IV.

When we're working through tough times, friends, if we let it, the Spirit will come. And it will guide us and lead us; and, *with sighs too deep for words*, it will take us to a better place.

CHECK IT OUT! This is how prayer works.

*For we do not know how to pray as we ought, says Paul, but the 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.*

In other words, in prayer, through the movement of the Spirit, God searches out the depths of our hearts—our sadness and sorrows, whatever contradictions linger in our spirit; all our shortcomings and sins. God searches all of this out and redirects us according to God’s purposes.

What the Spirit does is it brings our concerns (our weaknesses, frustrations, etc.) and God’s will into harmony.

V.

What Romans suggests here is that God knows us better than we know ourselves. And that, therefore, the Spirit has places to take us that we can’t go on our own, apart from the Spirit.

Let’s ask ourselves the question, *Do any of us really know the depths and meanings of our deepest spiritual self?* Of course not! How can we know? We’re not God. We have a sense of who we are and a sense of the deeper murmurings in our spirit, the **sighs too deep for words**. But we don’t know them as God knows them.

In prayer, through the work of the Spirit, all the time God is redirecting us and moving us towards greater possibilities. And Pentecost is a reminder that, when the Spirit comes, nothing in our lives is a *dead-end* street. There is no situation in our lives where the Spirit can’t work and bring change. Always, it’s a process.

Listen to Psalm 104 on this; Psalm 104 is a song of praise to God as Creator and Sustainer ...

*O Lord, how manifold are your works!
All of creation looks to you to be nourished and sustained.*

*When you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die.*

*When you send forth your Spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.*

It’s this last verse that speaks to us at Pentecost. *When God sends forth God’s Spirit, creation happens ... and the face of the earth is renewed and redirected.*

When you're having a down day or week, when you can't seem to get a handle on the many impinging challenges in your life—stressed out here, worried about something else over there, whatever it is; when the voices of cynicism are raging too strongly around you—***Let the Spirit come!*** Let it come and lift you ... and guide you and rebirth you.

VI.

When the Holy Spirit came that first Pentecost, the Spirit was lifting people up, through the mystery of tongues ... and many were amazed and their imaginations were excited.

But others sneered, Acts says. They sneered and said *They are filled with new wine* (i.e., they were talking this way because they were drunk). They were cynics, naysayers.

There are always voices of cynicism who want to put down any sign of hope and possibility ... any sign that the old might give way to the new. When this happens, we need to do as Peter did and *stand up* and *be a voice* against the cynics:

Check it out, said Peter (to the sneers of the cynics) what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*In the last days it will be ... that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh ...
And your sons and daughters will prophesy ...*

And your young men shall see visions ... and your old men shall dream dreams.

In those days, I will pour out my Spirit ... and I will show portents in heaven above and signs on the earth below ... Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

With sighs too deep for words, friends, let the Spirit come. And let it pour over us ... and let it search out our hearts ... and redirect us—again and again—that God's purposes might be realized. Come, O Holy Spirit, come!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com

