

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 7, July 31, 2011, dedicated to Priss and Shun Endo as they move to North Carolina, to all Muslims around the globe who begin the fast of Ramadan tonight at sunset, and always to the glory of God!

“The Truth in the Spirit”

**Romans (8:31-39) 9:1-5;
Matthew 14:13-21**

In the heat of the summer of 2011, we, as Christians, have been moving through Paul’s letter to the Romans. Last Sunday, in Romans 8:26-39, we were blessed with a passage that deserves another hearing. Romans 8:26-39 is often read in memorial or funeral services but rarely given time or reflection on Sunday. Coupled with Romans 9:1-5, we receive our blessing today from the Apostle Paul.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock/our salvation. Amen.

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In the ancient world of the Near East, there was one dignitary in each royal court whose job it was to usher visitors into the presence of royal highness. Anyone who wanted a chance to see the king in order to bring a gift from a neighboring kingdom, beg for mercy for a wayward relative, simply just say “hello” had to seek the good will and meet with the approval of the royal gatekeeper - or he or she would never lay eyes on the king. Whatever it took to convince the gatekeeper that he was sincere - cajoling, flattering, pleading, reasoning - this person knew if he succeeded, the reward was

great. The gatekeeper would vouch for his genuineness and sincerity and he would have access to the king forever after that. Simply stated, the gatekeeper served as the intercessor into the kingdom. (Story drawn from Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Mass., 1986, p.104).

St. Paul tells us in Roman 8:26-9:5 that each of us has two intercessors into the gates of the kingdom of God. First, there is the Holy Spirit, who teaches us how to pray. Second, there is Christ himself, who sits on the right-hand of the throne of God. Both of them stand ready to welcome us and assist us in our approach to the ruler of the universe. This is awesome good news – to have not one but two advocates as gatekeepers to God.

Nevertheless, most of us struggle trying to figure out what to say to either or both of them. It is because we do not know how to pray. Faced with two advocates and a God who reigns eternal, we find ourselves not sure how to pray, what to pray or why to pray and therefore we avoid prayer altogether, choosing to stand outside the gates, rather than stumbling in our attempt to pray and get it all wrong. We would rather not pray at all than pray the wrong thing or say the wrong words. What if we can't convince the advocates of our sincerity? What then?

Anyway, doesn't God know what we are thinking? Doesn't God already know what is in our hearts and minds? Doesn't God know better than we do what we need? We look at our prayer list and think either something is too trivial or something is too weighty. Why test God? Why try to manipulate the God who created the entire universe? So, all tied up in knots, we stay away altogether. We remain silent. We would rather not approach the throne of magnificence and power and truth than makes fools of ourselves in so doing. Silence is better than babbling. Right? But in reality, saying nothing is like refusing to make any new friends because you do not know what to say to them.

Romans 8:26, says, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” You see, using words is only part of praying to God. We talk aloud in prayer to hear ourselves talk, to hear how we sound as we present ourselves to God - sort of like talking in front of a mirror before a big meeting or encounter with someone who may intimidate us.

Sometimes our prayers change right before our ears. We struggle to pray aloud for someone we do not even like. We may even stifle that prayer because we are afraid if God hears us, then we will really need to act on our petition. But when all our words run out, that is usually when the spirit and the truth of our hearts and minds become evident because that is when we begin to listen to God. That is when the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, intercedes for us – with sighs, perhaps whimpers, or tears, or humming, or perhaps inconceivable and inaudible breaths – all TOO DEEP for words.

It is in the place where our deepest pains, our deepest struggles, our deepest prayers are found that we have no words. Like entering the king’s court with a petition, a need, and a thanksgiving, and finding ourselves only able to fall on our face and wail. This is not a particularly attractive sight, but most certainly a real reflection of who we are and where we are coming from.

I found myself in exactly this place a year ago, on Sunday August 1, 2010. I was alone in Tel Aviv, Israel, having just put Susan and Sarah on a plane to home. I knew I would not see them or anyone I knew for the next seven weeks. It was early morning and I really needed an advocate or two. Beyond all my words, the silence (and the sobbing) set in. I longed for family, for home, for all of you and comfort of worship and friendship in First Congregational Church. I longed to hear the organs, to hear the voices of our soloists and choir and my congregation lifting songs of praise to God. I longed for the

voices of English, not Hebrew and Arabic, saying in one accord the words of the Lord's Prayer.

I wrote these words in a prayer thousands of miles and seven hours away, as you were all still sleeping:

“O God, watch over my home, as Columbus and all my beloved ones sleep tonight. Guide their rising on this Sabbath Day. Guide their steps to church, synagogue, and mosque. Guide their way in worship and in rest for this day. Be graceful and kind to my city this night, O Lord. Watch over the poorest of the poor sleeping on her city streets. Watch over her newborn babies and first time parents. Watch over those who bring their fears and pain into this night. For all who are newly arrived in our city, help them find a place to lay their heads and sleep tonight. And I pray that as Columbus wakes this Sunday, all of your children may reflect your life, light, and love from dawn's early light through the setting of the first August sun.”

What really matters in the days and nights of our lives, when our sighs are too deep for words, is that we turn to the Spirit and Truth (revealed to Christians as Jesus Christ).

We turn to what matters most to us.

What matters most to you? What mattered and (still matters) most to me are my relationships - with my wife, sons, daughters, and family and my love for them, my love for you and for this city and state, and then right at the center of all these relationships was, is and always will be, my relationship with God, to whom all prayers, petitions and reflections are raised, especially when they are so deep they can't be spoken, when words are weighed down by sighs.

Fifteen hundred years ago, St. Augustine summed everything up this way, *“Love, and do what you will.”* Perhaps this is all that we need utter when we seek in holy love to find our way forward to the glory of God. But let's be honest. Most of us want and need more certainty than this answer gives.

We want guidelines, instructions, clear words about what is acceptable and not acceptable behavior. We turn to the Bible to give us these clear and unalterable directions. What we find is that Jesus speaks in parables or stories - often leaving us alone to figure out and take away what matters. So, we turn to St. Paul and count on him to deliver something definitive and he does - at times. But he also says over and over, words like "*What then do we say to all of this?*" And in I Corinthians 15, after laying out a complete and thorough defense of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, he concludes, "*I tell you, it is all a mystery.*" A mystery? Is this the most certainty he can offer?

We open our Bibles and we find lots of laws, definitive statements, and rules like roadmaps through the terrain of faith. But, it is the people we meet - Abraham, Sarah, Jacob and Rachel, Adam and Eve, Joseph and his brothers, Moses and his family, all the prophets and those wild and crazy kings of Judah and Israel, Jesus, Joseph and Mary and their family - including John the Baptist and his kin - Mary Magdalene, Judas, Peter and the other ten disciples, Stephen and Paul and Paul's closest friends like Timothy and Silas - all of these among a cast of thousands more who teach us how to pray (and how not to pray), to walk (and how not to walk), to talk (and how not to talk) with God when our sighs are too deep for words. In our relationships with them and theirs with one another, we learn to live this faith. Like all stories, all relationships in all families - we find ourselves running from some and running toward others.

With relationships, there are many uncertainties. We find ourselves struggling to see what they means and how we will work them out. All of this brings us back to the gatekeepers, the advocates, and ultimately back to God. All of this brings us back to prayer.

If you and I want to move from a second-hand relationship with God - one lived out through the stories of others in the Bible - and into a first-hand relationship, we will

have to pray. We will spend time not only talking to God, but also more significantly, listening to God. This means, listening to what only sounds like silence. It means listening to the wind moving, the howling of the neighbors dogs, the stillness of God's still small voice and the groans of the Holy Spirit. It means trusting Jesus to give us words that will make our prayers acceptable before his loving parent, the creator of the universe. It means believing that there is absolutely no prayer we cannot utter. There is nothing to fear in silence. There is nothing to fear in the moments when only groans or sighs come out of our mouths. In fact, we should always remember that the Spirit will carry us when we ask, when we pray and when we listen to God. The truth is we have everything to gain through our relationship with God, our beloved brother Jesus and our go-between friend and advocate, the Holy Spirit. And this is the Good News.

Or in the words of St. Augustine: *"Love, and do what you will."* Amen.

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