

Permission to Be Weak

Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension

Sermon Text: Romans 8:26-30



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. ²⁷ And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹ For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the first born among

many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified.

Jacob is stuck in a very difficult situation. He has a lot of debts and now doesn't know how he should pay them off. Even his best friends can no longer help. And now there's nothing left but to pray. Jacob prayed. He prayed for a long time and then he noticed that he couldn't even do that anymore. He was at the end of his strength and could only cry out about his powerlessness to heaven. We all know such situations like this one that Jacob experienced. Actually, our entire life can be described as such. There are always things that we can't do, there is failure, disappointment, and even total breakdown. And then we can only groan, "Ahhhhh, God!" And Paul talks about just such groaning in today's sermon text. What's interesting is that it is not even our groaning but the groaning of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit groaning within us. And with this Paul tells us: When things are going badly for us and we can only just groan, God prays within us and molds us in His image. That's a wonderful image and explains how we are completely in God's hand. When a sculptor creates a statue with a hammer and chisel then something similar happens. First, the sculptor finds a boulder laying in the dirt and mud. The sculptor isn't interested in the dirt and mud. Instead, he has a very precise picture of what the dirty stone should become. That's why he isn't embarrassed at all to go into the dirt and get the stone and bring it to his workshop. The sculptor uses a hammer and chisel in his workshop – his work is difficult and the stone still doesn't look good. But the sculptor doesn't let that bother him. He always has the picture of what the stone should become before his eyes. That's the only reason he continues at all. *So, the sculptor says: "If I didn't have the picture in my head and if I didn't have a love for the material, I wouldn't need to begin at all. And when I chisel the stone for the first time, I enter into a living relationship with the stone. I speak with the stone and the stone with me."* So out of a dirty rock emerges a wonderful work of art. Just as the sculptor describes his work, so Paul also describes the work of the Holy Spirit in God's workshop. The Holy Spirit has a clear, unambiguous picture before His eyes of what we should become and He has love. His love applies to us. Even when we are dirty and don't look worthy of love. But the picture that the Holy Spirit constantly has before Him is Jesus Christ Himself. We should be transformed and sculpted according to the image of Christ. We humans are the material that the Holy Spirit uses. From us should come people who are similar to Christ. But we are not yet what God wants us to be. Just like the rock from the dirt, we are sometimes inflexible and cold and look as ugly as the night. But the

image that is before the Holy Spirit's eyes is a different one. And that's why the Holy Spirit never gives up and keeps working on us. This picture of the stone sculptor's workshop explains our condition because both apply to us: The unshaped, dirty stone as well as Christ in whom we are baptized and who we should become like. On the one hand, we see the reality of our daily life. There we see so many sins and failures that we constantly commit. On the other hand, the image of Christ also applies to us, this picture belongs to us because we are baptized into Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who has this exact image before His eyes. It is He who makes this image of Christ our own. It is He who works on us with creativity and power so that we become like Christ. The Holy Spirit does all of that even though the similarities with the future image are not yet recognizable. This image of the Holy Spirit who works on us should encourage us because it shows us that we are not the sculptor. No, we are merely a cold stone. But it's the Holy Spirit who works on us and that's why when we can't keep the 10 Commandments and when we can no longer pray and even when we can't believe, we know that the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to do what we cannot do ourselves. The Sunday between Ascension Day and Pentecost wants to draw our attention to exactly this tension. The disciples of Jesus are an example for us as they wait for the Holy Spirit. Between Ascension Day and Pentecost, they live in a tension that is hard to bear. Behind them stands Christ and all that He did. These same disciples know about the promise of the Holy Spirit. But they haven't experienced Him yet. Therefore, all that Christ did still has no meaning for them yet. They are powerless and at the mercy of Satan and the world. We Christians live in a similar tension. Everything that Christ has done for us is in the past. We hope that the Holy Spirit will transform us and make us into a living image of Christ. But the present constrains us. So often, we painfully realize that we are not yet what we are supposed to be. In this tension we pray today's Psalm: "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me!" (Psalm 27:7) When we cry out to God like that, we look towards the future with hope, waiting for the Holy Spirit to do His work in us.

We groan and the Holy Spirit groans in us, and in the process, something changes in us. Just as you can observe the changes to the stone in the sculptor's workshop, so you can observe changes with us. And that's a miracle. It is a miracle that only God can perform in us. It is not humanly possible. And because we are human and not stone, we are able to observe ourselves in the mirror or compare ourselves with others. Very quickly, we come to the fundamentally wrong conclusion that we have to transform ourselves and that God isn't the One who transforms us. So we have a distorted image of Christ before us and it leads to dishonesty and legalistic thinking, sometimes even to the point that we judge others who don't match our standards. We deceive ourselves with this. We change moral standards or superficial things. And yet, we remain far from God. In this situation, we are completely lost. In this way, we have distanced ourselves from the work of the Holy Spirit. We no longer want God in our lives. We'd rather do it alone. And that's where we fail. Sometimes, we find that we are at the end of our faith. Sometimes we think that there is no God or that He doesn't care about us. Sometimes, we break God's Commands or can't deal with the attacks of Satan. Sometimes, we can't pray at all. That's how it is with us. And the Holy Spirit loves us exactly as we are – dirty, unpleasant, contradictory. And He works on us who are weak. This comes up constantly in great big writing in our sermon text: **THE SPIRIT HELPS US IN OUR WEAKNESS. THE SPIRIT SEARCHES HEARTS. THE SPIRIT KNOWS. THE SPIRIT INTERCEDES. THE SPIRIT FOREKNEW. THE SPIRIT PREDESTINED. THE SPIRIT CALLED. THE SPIRIT HAS MADE RIGHTEOUS.** He is the One who works on us. How could it be otherwise when the dead stone of the sculptor is a masterpiece of the Creator, not a creation of the stone. Amen.