

Pastor Joe Polzin  
 Romans 8:18-27  
 “When You Don’t Know”  
 Year A – Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11)  
 July 19, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

I always get a little uneasy when people tell me they know what God’s will is. And I don’t mean God’s general will, like God wants all people to be saved, or God wants us to walk in the good works that he has prepared for us, or easy stuff like that. No, I’m talking about Christians who always seem to be quite certain they know specifically what God’s will is for the future. When they’re talking about the future, and they say something like, “Well, I know that God will do [this]... or I know that he wants me to do [that].”

And I feel this way about pastors as well as lay people. I’m telling you right now, don’t trust a pastor who *always* knows *all* the answers. Who seems to know *exactly* what the future holds for him, or for you, or for the church. Who always seems to have everything put together. Who never seems to be stumped or struggle with anything in his own life. Because that’s not reality. The truth of the matter is, *all* Christians struggle, and *all* Christians get stumped, clergy and laity alike. We don’t *always* know what God’s will is.

Now, I’m not trying to be negative here. It’s just the people who are always sure of themselves, always sure of what God’s will is, are somehow missing Romans 8. Right before our Epistle Reading began, in verse 17, the Apostle Paul says, “And if children then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we *suffer* with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” According to this verse, there doesn’t seem to be any way other than suffering or struggling with Christ.

And Paul explains *why* in our Epistle Reading. It’s because of the sufferings of this present time. It’s because the entire creation is still subject to futility going all the way back to Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden. And since that day, all of creation has been groaning. It’s groaning in *hope*, to be sure, not despair. There *is* hope, there is certain and eager hopeful expectation for the day when Christ comes again, and this whole world will be restored and made whole, because that’s also the day when God’s children will be restored and receive our full inheritance. So, it’s not despair. There’s always hope.

But that’s the point. “Hope that is seen,” Paul says, “is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?” (8:24) So we don’t see it yet. We have to wait for it with patience. We know what’s coming, but we don’t know exactly how we’re going to get there. We are unable to see exactly what God is doing at all times. We can’t tell what his will is in this moment. And so, Paul says, we wait. And that means we’re inevitably going to struggle and wonder while we wait.

And even though, the Apostle writes, we possess the Holy Spirit now, that Spirit within us is only the firstfruits. The down payment of our hope. The full experience of God’s gift of salvation is not yet. And so, while we’re waiting, we may not always know how to pray in the moment. We may not always know for what we should pray.

The people who are always sure of what God’s will is, who always have the specific answer to every specific problem in their lives, those people are not paying attention. They’ve forgotten, or they’re not willing to admit, that this is still the time of groaning, of suffering, of

struggling, and of not knowing. And that's simply the truth: that life is often made up of more questions than answers.

How are things going to go with me? What are God's plans for my life? How will he answer my prayers? What will happen in my children's lives? In my grandchildren's lives? How will it go with them? What will the future of our church be? What will the future of our country be?

And I think the year 2020 has only made us feel this uncertainty even more. What will this year's elections bring? What path are we heading down? What will happen with this pandemic? What will happen in the fall with our schools? When will things get better? When will things feel normal again? When will our church be back to normal again? Will it *ever* be normal again? Will I stay healthy? Will my family and friends be healthy? All these questions and a million more, because that's the way life is; we don't know how it's all going to work out.

But when you realize this, and when you're honest about it, then you are ready to receive God's comfort. You are ready to receive the comfort of Romans 8. Because when you don't know, there is one who does know. When you are weak, there is one who is strong. When you are uncertain, there is one who is certain. When you are confused, there is one who is clear. It's God's own Spirit. The eternal Third Person of the Holy Trinity. The Spirit himself, the Apostle Paul says, who helps us in our weakness (8:26).

And he helps us because when our own hearts are filled with confusion and uncertainty, he's there interceding for us. He's praying for us. You can't hear him; the Apostle says the Spirit's groanings are "too deep for words" (8:26). But you, baptized and believing children, sons and daughters of the living God, you have been given the Holy Spirit.

And when you do not know what God's will for your life is, you can know that the Holy Spirit knows. He knows and he's praying for you. The Spirit is praying to the Father on your behalf because of your weakness. And, Paul says, God who searches the heart, finds the mind of the Spirit in you. God is speaking to God for you. The Holy Spirit is asking that the Father's will be done in your life and in the life of all his saints.

And what that means is that you don't have to know. And you also don't have to *pretend* that you know. These are hard and confusing days; it's just part of the sufferings of this present time. This time when we will continue to struggle and so often not know. But the Spirit knows, and he dwells in you, and from within you the Holy Spirit is interceding for you. He's praying to the Father. And the Father hears. And the Father knows.

And that's why, in the very next verse, which we'll hear next week, the Apostle Paul can confess this seemingly unbelievable truth: he says, "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good" (8:28). You see, even when you don't know, you do know that God is acting according to his good and gracious will for you, because the Holy Spirit has already been poured into your heart and the hearts of all the saints.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, there is great comfort for us here. It means we can relax. It means we don't have to be afraid. We weren't in charge anyway, and it's very hard for us to admit we aren't in charge. But it's even harder on us, and the people around us, when we pretend that we are in charge, when we know that we're really not. Great arrogance and sin always happens when I insist that I always know exactly what God is doing, and that he must do it this way and in this timeframe.

But Paul here declares that you are free, free to turn away from that kind of grasping and panicky living. Free to trust in your God. Free to trust in the Holy Spirit who intercedes for you,

even though you don't know what he's praying. But you do know one thing that he's praying. You know at least one word that the Spirit is praying. "*Abba*. Father."

Paul in Galatians says, "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "*Abba!* Father!" (4:6) The Spirit calls out to the Father on your behalf. Not "Master." Not "Lord." But "Father." And because the Spirit cries, "Father," we are not afraid, and we too are able to cry, "*Abba!* Father!" We heard it in our reading from Romans last week, verse 15: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, '*Abba!* Father!'"

We do not need to be afraid. Even when we struggle, and even when we do not know, we do not need to be afraid. Because there was another one. There was another one who cried out in a garden, in our place, under our punishment, and for our salvation. Jesus called out, "*Abba!* Father! Let your will be done" (Matthew 26:42). In love for you, Jesus submitted to the Father's will. In love for you, he suffered the Father's wrath over the sin of the world. He drank the cup. He died the death. He endured the hell.

And of this you are certain, and you never need to doubt, this Jesus has made the almighty God your *Abba*, your Father. And the Father who sent his Son for you has sent his Spirit into your heart. So that even when you struggle, you are not afraid. And you don't have to know. Because your *Abba*, your Father, he knows.

And when, on the day the Father sends his Son a second time to redeem all of creation, and to raise and redeem your body from the grave, then you too will see and know. You'll know the thing for which you have hoped and waited for so long. You will see Jesus face-to-face and you will know, finally and fully, the glory that he has waiting just for you. In Jesus' name.

**Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**