

It's OK to stammer, stutter and groan

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Come, Holy Ghost our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire. Thou the anointing Spirit art, who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart. [AMEN]

This prayer is from the 8th century and is one of the oldest prayers in our liturgy. It is also, I think, very appropriate for today, the Day of Pentecost.

Today's reading from Acts tells what happened. The rest of the Book of Acts tells us of the work of the Holy Spirit in the early church.

But that was then, and now is now.

You might wonder where the Holy Spirit is today and how we can find it.

Maybe all this "Holy Spirit business" is just folklore and fantasy.

Paul addresses these questions in today's reading from Romans, to which I'd like to turn.

He wrote the letter between 54 and 58 AD. It is his longest letter, and in it we confront the full power of his clarity, his maturity, and his Christian witness.

Paul speaks of "groaning" and of waiting. He talks of weakness, of adoption, and of hope. And he tells us that the Holy Spirit intercedes FOR us, and that the Holy Spirit ALWAYS acts in accordance with God's will.

He uses powerful imagery and stirring rhetoric. But his message might come across as kind of intellectual to his 21st century readers.

But it's not.

To make that point, I need to introduce you to Jennifer and Ronald. The story of their groaning, waiting, weakness, and hope is a testimony to Paul's wisdom as well as the continuing activities of the Holy Spirit.

In 1984, Jennifer was a college student in Burlington, NC, and it was in July of that year that her life changed forever. At 3 am in the morning, a man broke into her apartment and assaulted and raped her.

A composite sketch was created which eventually led to a police line-up where she ID'd her attacker. The man she picked was Ronald.

Eventually Ronald was convicted on the basis of her eye-witness identification of Ronald.

On the day of his conviction, Jennifer prayed for him [in her own words] to die miserably in jail – alone, afraid, and destined for hell.”

This prayer went on for 11 years, but her pain and groaning did not go away. HER life became a living hell. Ronald’s face followed her everywhere, and sound sleep never seemed to come.

Ronald was groaning as well. He relentlessly proclaimed his innocence, but no one was listening. He wound up in the maximum security Central Prison in Raleigh – discouraged and scared. “It felt like even God had forgotten about me,” is how he described it.

His sister sent him some advice:

We’ve had a hard life, and we still don’t have much. But I’m free in my heart, I’m happy in my heart. The Lord knows how much we can bear. He knows the outcome of your life before you got into this situation. There is a reason, Ron. Be free in your heart.

This could have been lifted right out of today’s reading. Or it might reflect the stoicism of southern blacks. Either way, it was good advice, and Ronald chose to follow it.

Fast forward to 1994. Thanks to OJ Simpson, the whole world found out about DNA testing.

Eventually, a test was performed on the physical evidence. The results not only cleared Ronald, but proved that another man (similar in appearance to Ronald) was the perpetrator. Jennifer’s eyewitness testimony had been WRONG.

Jennifer heard the news, and she promptly transitioned from one living hell into another. As she describes it,

Fear swallowed me whole ..., because now I had children and a husband. I was waiting for Ronald Cotton to come and exact revenge. It was only fair. I had wished him to die violently and cruelly for what I believed he had done to me, so why wouldn’t he want me to die for what I had taken away from him.”

Ronald, meanwhile, started off his new life with an appearance on Larry King Live. Larry asked him the question everyone had on their minds: “And you’re not angry, right?”

After the show, Ronald described his feelings about that question:

It was hard to put it into words, that I had had eleven years to think about what had happened to me, years in prison where I made a decision to let go of the anger and frustration. Since I had gotten out, I came to feel that God had given me a second chance at life, a chance to really make something of myself and I could only go forward.

Ronald had hope, UNSEEN hope, and he waited patiently. For 11 years, he really didn’t know what to pray for. After he got out, however, the Spirit interceded and began to reveal the plan.

He went on to receive a full pardon, get married, start work, and to have a family.

Two years later, in 1996, the producers of the Frontline series did a show called "What Jennifer Saw?" It was an investigative piece about how eyewitnesses make mistakes. Ronald, of course, was interviewed, and he concluded by saying: "I would like to hear what she has to say – in her own words – to me."

Let me use Jennifer's own words to describe her reaction to the show:

Eleven years. How do eleven years pass when you're locked up for a crime you didn't commit? I couldn't begin to imagine. Ronald had lost 11 years of time with his family, eleven years of falling in love, getting married, having kids. BECAUSE I HAD PICKED HIM. My guilt was suffocating.

She resolved right then to meet him face to face. She had no idea what to say or how she would react. As Paul put it, the Spirit interceded for her with groans that words cannot express.

Here are the words God gave her when they actually did meet:

Mr. Cotton. I don't even know what to call you. Ron? Ronald? Mr. Cotton? If I spent the rest of my life telling you how sorry I am, it wouldn't come close to how I feel. Can you ever forgive me?

And God gave words to Ronald, too:

I forgive you. I'm not angry at you. I don't want you to spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder. All I want is for us all to go on and have a happy life.

Then [in Ronald's words]

Jennifer looked at me, speechless. I could see there was pain, a lot of pain that she was trying to let go. She didn't look at me and see the man who had hurt her, the man she wanted dead, she saw ME. I didn't even think about it until after the fact, but I reached for her hands and all of a sudden, we were standing there, hugging. I said to her that I had to believe God had a plan, and that this miscarriage of justice would one day be revealed. I told her I used to read the Book of Psalms a lot.

John the Baptist spoke of a baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire. Thanks to Jennifer and Ronald, we now know something about the Holy Spirit and about fire.

Over the next 12 years, Jennifer, Ronald, and both of their families have become friends. They have traveled the country to share their testimony. Thanks to them, judges, lawyers, and legislators have all learned that eyewitness testimony is often wrong.

So let's try to put all this together. How does this all add up for us here, today, at St. Thomas IOU?

I'll make 3 points.

And the first is this:

The wisdom of Scripture is alive and well. It is NOT obsolete and dated. The basic dimensions of the human condition are unchanged.

The sufferings of which Paul spoke continue today. Just like the sufferings of 54 AD, today's sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed. Are you looking for some "Holy Spirit and fire" in your spiritual life? If so, start by READING YOUR BIBLE. Remember that Ronald spent a lot of time reading from Psalms. Think of a plant. First, you put a tiny seed into the ground, then you water it every day, and finally it blossoms.

Maybe you've heard a seed here today, or maybe you did last Sunday. The Bible is a great watering can, but you have to USE IT.

My second point is that waiting and groaning is uncomfortable and often unpleasant.

It's part of the plan!! Paul compares it to the pain of childbirth. After the child is born, the pain is forgotten.

And let's not forget those "mighty acts" of Jesus himself. As we are reminded on Palm Sunday, we are called to "enter with joy upon the contemplation of those mighty acts "whereby [GOD] has given us life and immortality."

A LOT of pain and groaning went on before Ronald and Jennifer were adopted, redeemed, and saved. There just wasn't any easy way out.

Paul understood the need for encouragement. He was especially close to the Church in Philippi and wrote them a letter of encouragement. In v. 3:13 and 14 he says this:

But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Let's face it. It's HARD!!

I'll put it to you personally: I'm not half the man that Ronald is. I'd probably be angry FOREVER. Even if I read Psalms, I can see myself going off the deep end along the way. Irish ancestry is a lot of fun St. Patrick's Day, but it has its dark side. We are experts when it comes to anger, resentments, and grudges.

You know what I mean - just read your Irish history!

Is there groaning and pain somewhere in your life? God's call is for us to "press on," and His promise is that he will be there alongside us.

My final point is simple, yet difficult. The Holy Spirit ALWAYS brings people together and NEVER divides them.

Paul tells us that "...the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

And what is God's will?

In his High Priestly Prayer (John 17:22-23), Jesus prays this:

²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

If we are divided, Jesus says, the WORLD WILL NEVER KNOW HIM. The Holy Spirit brought Jennifer and Ronald together. They “forgot what was behind” and “strain” towards what is ahead.”

Unfortunately, some in TEC seem to have forgotten this. Quite frankly, it’s sometimes hard to see God’s handiwork in any of it.

So, what are we to do?

Some of you are “groaning.” You are not alone, because the whole creation is groaning along side of you. Your groaning might be like mine – stubborn and proud, or it might be something else. There may seem to be no hope for you or for your situation.

But God specializes in irredeemable situations – just ask Ronald and Jennifer.

Paul tells us that “we do not know what we ought to pray for, but the spirit himself intercedes for us.”

So it’s OK to stammer and stutter. We may sense the ending, but we just don’t know how to get started.

Listen to the “comfortable words” from Matthew: Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (11:28)

This is an invitation, and I want to make it personal. When you come forward to the communion rail today, bring along your burdens, your pain, and your groaning. Toss it all at the foot of the cross and leave it there. Ask Jesus to walk back with you to your seat. The Holy Spirit is searching your heart RIGHT NOW. Jesus’ arms are open, and he’s waiting for you. He’s been there; he knows the drill.

AMEN