

## *Help in Our Weakness*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached at a Chapel Service on Pentecost, (31May), 2009.*

Text: Romans 8:26

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” ~St. Paul

I have told you the story of a visit I made about a year ago on a National Guard sergeant from upstate New York while he was a patient at Bethesda. Eighteen days before my visit he was injured in Iraq with the loss of both legs below the knees and traumatic brain injury. We had to suit up to protect him from our bugs—or us from his—prior to entering the room. I was briefed on the particulars of his situation by my ‘handler’ before we went into his room. His mother was there. His young wife was not. She had given birth to their first child, a daughter, while he was in Iraq. He had met his child for the first time the weekend before my visit. I was told he couldn’t speak but the doctors thought he could understand what was said. Another chaplain was also with me so we went into the room together. I was immediately overwhelmed by the magnitude of this young man’s sacrifice and feeling very much like I had little I could offer to help him. He had already had several surgeries and faced many more. I could engage only in what felt like a one-sided conversation. I learned from his mother he was a police officer near Buffalo. One-way conversations are very difficult, especially with a person like the sergeant whom I didn’t know. I spoke at one point about his child and her visit the weekend before and that was when I realized the sergeant knew what I was saying. One tear fell down his cheek as I spoke of his wife and child.

As the visit neared an end, I told him I was going to offer him a prayer and afterwards his mother and Chaplain Ridley and I would say the Lord’s Prayer together. We held hands and I placed my hand on the sergeant’s shoulder. I began to pray feeling very inadequate, having little to offer that could help. My prayer fumbled along, like my earlier talk with him. I prayed about the mountain of problems and pain he faced but said that we knew, “O God, you are bigger than this mountain.” I began to say the Lord’s Prayer and his mother and Chaplain Ridley joined in. About half way through the prayer, I opened my eyes and noticed that the sergeant was moving his lips, trying to say the *Our Father* with us.

That was a powerful moment for me. I recognized for the first time that I had been sent there, not just as an admirer visiting a wounded warrior but as a minister of God to help this young man who couldn’t speak, to make contact with his God. He did face a mountain of problems. He was probably worrying about his future as a policeman, as a father and husband, as

a human being. I may not have had a scalpel or a pill to contribute to his cure, but I could help him come into the presence of his creator, “the Lord and Giver of life.”<sup>1</sup>

As I considered the passage in Romans 8 this week from St. Paul, I thought about the sergeant. “...The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”<sup>2</sup> Not always as dramatic as his case in Bethesda, I have often found that people in crisis have difficulty forming words for prayer. They don’t know what to say to God or how even to frame a request. Paul must have known and recognized a ‘sigh too deep for words’ can sometimes be all we can muster. The Spirit gives utterance with words we cannot form during our trials and troubles.

About six months after that visit I was back in Bethesda and saw Chaplain Ridley again. I spoke to him about the sergeant from upstate New York. I reminded him of the case and our visit and asked, “Whatever happened to him?” “Well,” Chaplain Ridley replied. “Five days after your visit to him he started speaking again. Just last week I had a report on him. He is at the VA hospital in Boston, fitted for prosthetic legs and walking again!” God be praised! “Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” There could not have been a case of greater weakness—my own or the sergeant’s. But as Paul said elsewhere of his own life and answer to prayers, God “said to me, ‘*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*’”<sup>3</sup>

We believe in a great and wonderful God who not only hears our prayers, but gives us the faith that encourages us to turn to him for help. Even if we cannot find or form the words, the Spirit intercedes on our behalf to help us as we cry for help. Even more marvelous, the Lord and Giver of life answers our prayers. We do not have to be pillars of strength to believe. We only have to be open to receive his Spirit in our weakness. God can and does use our frailties to accomplish miracles of grace. As his own Son humbly accepted his fate on the cross, we too have found the weakness of God is stronger, far stronger, than what counts for human power. May God again come to us in our weakness, helping us to pray, helping us to heal, helping us to live.

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<sup>1</sup> “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life.” *The Nicene Creed*.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:26.

<sup>3</sup> 2Corinthians 12:9.