

Holy Help

We are concluding our worship series for this month with one additional thing Jesus didn't say: "God helps those who help themselves." Maybe you already knew Jesus didn't say it, but still thought that it was in scripture somewhere. If so, you are not alone. A survey by the Barna group (a Christian polling organization) discovered that more than 8 out of 10 Americans believe this statement is in the bible. (It's not.) In other informal polls, some people insist it's one of the Ten Commandments. (It isn't.) It is found in writings by Ben Franklin and in one of Aesop's fables. In his second letter to the church at Thessaloniki, the Apostle Paul writes about working to put food on your own table. Apparently, his words about Jesus' imminent return were so convincing that people decided they could just hang out not working and meddle in other people's business.¹ This is not the crux of Paul's message, however. From the moment he met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus Paul was almost entirely dependent on the kindness of strangers for shelter, food, and financial support. Yes, we believe he worked as a tentmaker, but that work would not have been enough to sustain him in any significant way.² He needed help. And he knew it.

On this rainy morning in North Carolina and throughout God's beloved and embattled world, the church in every nation is celebrating Pentecost, the birthday of the church as it is often called. As we heard Katharine read a few moments ago, the disciples were gathered in Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed them when the Holy Spirit blew in with flames and fireworks to usher the early church on its

¹ 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, CEB

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/what-the-tentmaking-business-was-really-like-for-the-apostle-paul/>

way out into the streets of Jerusalem and beyond. On Pentecost we wear red and celebrate the Spirit's power and boldness. We marvel at the sounds and the whirlwind of confusion and joy. As many of you know, I had a short stint as a cheerleader in high school and college. Pentecost has often reminded me of a big pep rally for the church, complete with a loud rush of wind and tiny persistent shoulder-sized bonfires firing us up to go back out and do and be church in big ways with the Spirit cheering us on loudly and proudly from the clouds. And in traditions like ours, we have been quick to pack the Spirit's more out-there inclinations away until the next year, leaving the more robust and rambunctious Spirit-filled activities to our siblings in the Pentecostal traditions. We are Presbyterians, after all. That said, the Holy Spirit is not something we can simply tuck away in the resource room or lock in the silver closet.

[Read Romans 8: 18-30, CEB]

“The Spirit comes to help our weakness,” Paul insists in this letter to the church in Rome. The Greek is stronger than a simple pat-pat, there-there. Woven into the word for *help* in this case is a word that means “aggressively lay hold of.”³ I started taking ballet in the fourth grade. I danced through high school and college, and I still love to dance even now. In the spring of my junior year in high school, I was given a solo in the annual dance concert. I practiced and practiced and earned substantial shin splints in the process because the dance required that I dance in short, red suede boots, specially fitted with rubber soles. With one performance under my belt on Friday night, I stepped on stage with the rest of the dancers for a dress rehearsal on Saturday. I danced the first few steps of the piece and face-planted loudly and spectacularly. I was stunned. Thankfully I was fine, apart from my bruised ego and flaming red cheeks. I don't remember much more than that. I do remember my dance teacher's voice and her astonishingly strong grip as she helped me regain my footing. My guess is that you have known

³ <https://biblehub.com/greek/4878.htm>

that grip too. Maybe you have caught a child seconds before she tripped over her new sandals or tried to dart headlong into the parking lot after being freed from his car seat. Maybe you have felt the grip of a strong arm as you regained your own footing after a tumble or following an extended stay in a hospital bed. This is the help Paul describes, perhaps recalling his own need for help when he fell to his knees blinded by the presence of the risen Lord. The Spirit comes to help our weakness, gripping us by the arm and steadying our steps.

On the heels of emphasizing the Spirit's firm grip, Paul then describes one of the most powerful images in all of scripture: "We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans."⁴ *With sighs too deep for words*, we hear in other translations. I long ago lost count of the times I have leaned on this text when praying with someone. At bedsides, in every office in every church I have served, on church pews, in living rooms, and over the phone, I have asked for the Spirit to pray what I could not name, what I could not find the words to speak. I needed the Spirit's help, and I knew it.

We marvel every year at the astonishing work of the Holy Spirit that blows into Jerusalem and enables people from all over to hear the good news from the mouths of those who look nothing like them and who speak in foreign tongues. I have spent numerous Pentecost Sundays hearing the beautiful words of the Lord's Prayer spoken in Spanish, Korean, Creole, and Urdu. I love the hum of different languages swirling in worship and praise. And yet this morning, I am struck by the ways the Spirit understands one language we all share: The Spirit is fluent in *groan*. The Spirit—God's Spirit, understands the language of grief, of shock, of anguish, of sadness, of anxiety when spoken words are not enough or not even possible. And God's Spirit knows what we need, knows what we long for

⁴ Romans 8: 26, CEB

without our breathing a word or lifting a finger. The Holy Spirit grabs hold of us, prays for us, and helps us when we cannot begin to help ourselves.

I lean on this understanding of the Spirit's stubborn work of help and support in my own life. I give thanks that the Spirit knows what I need to say, even when I cannot find the words. But the Spirit is not simply holding me by my own little elbow. Throughout this letter—and most of his letters—Paul addresses the church, the gathered community who claim Jesus Christ as Lord. He knows that the Spirit is not simply at work stirring the hearts of selected individuals here and there. The Spirit is at work in and through the community, and just as individuals have moments of weakness and struggle, the church does, too. Paul knows this to be a fact. Individuals struggle; communities struggle. Individuals need help; the church needs help, too. We did not build the church by sheer force of will, nor will we sustain her all on her own. We cannot. And thanks be to God, we do not have to. We need help, and it is good for us to know it.

Anne Lamott wrote a book a few years ago entitled, *Help, Thanks, Wow: Three Essential Survival Prayers*. She rightly insists that that first prayer, "Help!" is the one prayer we struggle most to pray, "But it is the great prayer, [she says] and it is the hardest prayer, because you have to admit defeat — you have to surrender, which is the hardest thing any of us do, ever."⁵ No one I know wants to admit defeat. No one likes to ask for help. So often, too often really, I find myself insisting that I should be able to do this, survive that, tackle this, or solve that without help. But I can't. And there is such blessed relief in realizing that I do not have to.

I mentioned earlier that Ben Franklin is credited with the saying, "God helps those who help themselves." Mr. Franklin was brilliant and wise, and I give thanks for the ways he helped shape this

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2012/11/19/164814269/anne-lamott-distills-prayer-into-help-thanks-wow>

nation. I also give thanks that his words are not scripture, for there are far too many instances when I cannot possibly help myself, when I need divine help to take another step, when I cannot stand without the love, prayers, and grip of a community filled with others who know themselves to be utterly dependent on God's help, too. I also know that I am not called to sit on my hands or twiddle my thumbs and simply wait for Christ to return. I and we are called to offer our God-given gifts for the holy work of creating a good, faithful, and joy-filled life for our families and our neighbors, whether those neighbors live around the corner or on the other side of the planet or anywhere in between. On my good days, I am able to remember with gratitude and humility that I do not shape such a life all on my own. Not one of us is truly self-made. Not one of us is self-saved. Nor is any one of us expected to go it alone or fend for ourselves. And that is some of the best news there is.

Birthdays are often about gifts, about looking back, and about making wishes and offering prayers for the future. On this Pentecost day, this birthday, and every day, I give thanks for the gift of the church. I give thanks for a Spirit-filled church who sings with joy, plays hard, wonders fearlessly, works faithfully, loves unabashedly, and creates space openly for our groans and sighs. I give thanks for a Spirit-led community who urgently calls forth our best gifts for the good of all and for the glory of God. I give thanks for a Spirit-fueled church who does not pretend to have all the answers but trusts completely in the One who does. I give thanks for a Spirit-infused community who unapologetically leans on and listens for the Spirit's leading, loving in the name of the One who loves us, helping in the name of the One who helps us. I am so grateful for a church like that because *I need* a church like that. God's beloved and embattled world needs a church like that, too, a church that embodies and proclaims this great good news: God helps those who *cannot* help themselves.

Thanks be to God. Amen.