Sometimes we can’t find words for prayer when we are too stressed or when we are filled with fear or when we are in shock and taken by surprise. How often have you thought, when you were overwhelmed with emotion, “I simply don’t know how to respond, I don’t know what to pray for: health or comfort? Quantity of life or quality of life?”

It seems to me that this is also the kind of prayer we often pray for our children, for we know that if we only pray for easy lives, for only the happiness and joy we wish for them, that they will not be equipped for the challenges which inevitably arise in life. We know even if we could spare them the ‘hard knocks’ of the world that it was some of those experiences in our own lives that taught us courage or stamina or patience; skills which have served us well through the years. So in the indecision of how to pray for what is best, we pray simply with ‘sighs too deep for words.’

Paul talks about these kinds of things in his letter to the Romans in the context of speaking about how we deal with life’s challenges and about the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit speaks for those who cannot see that for which they so eagerly hope. The Spirit speaks for those who need light to peer into the darkness ahead as they are searching for direction, whether that darkness is for a loved one facing difficulties or for a church, seeking discernment of the future. In these times, the spirit comes alongside to accompany us on our journey.

Paul’s whole focus in Romans 8 is to explain that although we sinful human beings often have a difficult time trying to be good, that difficulty can be overcome when we acknowledge that the Spirit dwells in us and that the Spirit in us displaces the power of sin and makes transforming new life possible.

What Paul is saying first is that it is God’s Spirit, the Holy Spirit within each of us that teaches us how to pray, that prays with us, that prays for us when all we can do is sigh. It is the Holy Spirit within us that encourages and augments this communication with God, which we call prayer.

Yet, I wonder if that is your experience? I have said that I know many have felt this kind of “sigh too deep for words” and I am sure that most of you would have named it prayer had you been asked to put a name to that ‘wordless sigh.’ But I wonder, would you have identified it as the action of the indwelling Holy Spirit? I don’t think most of us imagine God’s Spirit as dwelling inside us, yet that is the assertion of Paul’s statements to the Romans. It is also in our passage from the gospel of John, where Jesus says, the “Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). Another word for this spirit in the Hebrew is Ruah, which also means breath. The indwelling spirit is the breath of God that gives us life. And when we sigh and then take a deep breath, we are bringing the life giving breath of God inside ourselves to calm, strengthen and inspire.

This whole passage for me is about the transforming activity of God’s Spirit in us with prayer as the first example. For prayer, is a very complex and yet, a very simple thing. The first prayer I ever learned was probably also your first prayer. “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” It affirms with the eloquence of a child, as our A Brief Statement of Faith confirms, “In life and in death we belong to God.”

Or look at the Lord’s Prayer, which Jesus gave us as an example of how to pray. Each phrase in the prayer contains within it a whole multitude of implications and understandings. For example, when we say, “Give us this day our daily bread,” we are speaking to God as we would to a friend asking for what we need. For example, any of us might have the occasion to say, “Karen, would you be willing to drop me to the doctor’s this afternoon?” or “John, my freezer went out, could I put some things in yours until I get it fixed?” And, of course, Karen would be glad to drop you at the doctor, and probably even pick you up afterwards, and certainly John would willingly share his freezer space, just as you or I would be happy to offer a ride to Karen or space to John were they the ones in need. When we talk to God as we would a friend who knows us and cares deeply for us, we are addressing what Paul calls God’s Spirit, which is inside each of us.

Paul’s discussion about the transforming activity of God’s Spirit in us then moves from prayer to explore other areas. Paul talks about how the Spirit within us helps transform our vision: helping us to see and understand that God’s will for us, (both individually and together as a church)
is for our good, reminding us how God can work through our weakness, suffering, pain and trials. How God can work through even the departure of a beloved pastor to remind us that life is a gift from God to receive with gratitude and to pursue with courage.

Paul talks about how the Spirit within is helps transform our perceptions of ourselves, reminding us that we are created to be “conformed to the image of God’s Son.” Our goal is to live up to our creation as God’s children, for we were not only created, but we continue to be called by name. The indwelling Spirit of God also justifies us, makes us right with God, restores and transforms our relationship to the creator, redeemer, sustainer, and finally reminds us that the glory which comes to all of God’s children is ours as well because God loves us.

Paul talks about how the Spirit within us helps transform our attitude, reminding us of God’s faithfulness and that nothing, nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When we talk about the transforming activity of God’s indwelling Spirit, we are talking about the work of Spirituality.

It has become more and more obvious to me over the years that there is a deep hunger in the world for what I would call a sense of God’s presence, a sense of the Holy, a sense of how to live a spiritual life, a life centered in the power of God’s spirit within you and me. That it is as evident inside the church as it is in the world. Saint Augustine confessed to God, “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” That search for a resting place in God is the goal of the spiritual life.

One of the leaders in today’s movement toward a Reformed Spirituality is Howard Rice, retired professor from San Francisco Theological Seminary. He defines the spiritual life as one which guides us in developing a living sense of the present reality of God. (Reformed Spirituality, Pg. 10).

Others make the distinction that spirituality is not finding a place in your life for God, but in finding your place in the life of God. Paul talks about it in this letter to the church of Rome as the effort to conform to the image of Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. For me, leading a spiritual/spirit-filled life, encompasses all these ideas, but put simply, “it is increasing our awareness and our responsiveness to God’s Loving Spirit present within us.” And it is something that I work at, all of the time, in my own life.

For with Paul, I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen