

The story of the day of Pentecost is a wonderfully dramatic and powerful story. It gives us insight to what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world: It's overcoming the walls that divide humanity, bringing reconciliation between people who once seemed strange to one another. It's creating communities of connection and belonging where all are valued, all are cared for. The Holy Spirit empowers people to stand up strong and true, particularly in the face of the voices that would wound and oppress, which is what the voice of the mocker in the story of Pentecost represents when declares, "Pay no attention to these people, they're just a bunch of drunks." Peter rises up strong and true to debunk his claim.

The story is helpful given the clues it provides as to what the Holy Spirit is up to in the world, but in a certain sense for most of us the story is pretty hard to identify with in so far we've never experienced anything remotely powerful and mind-boggling as what took place that day.

And that inability to identify with this story can lead us to doubt that the Holy Spirit – the power of God is real and at work in the world and in our lives.

And that is why the Apostle Paul's words are so helpful here. Even though Paul had some powerful experiences of the Holy Spirit in his life in his letters he routinely acknowledges the fact that to be a human is often to feel anything but powerful. In 2Corinthians he talks about how "our outer nature is wasting away." In the chapter 7 of Romans -- the chapter right before the one Bob read -- Paul acknowledges that there are times in his own life when he knows the good he should be doing, but he simply can't will himself to do it. That in certain ways he remains in bondage to the destructive power of sin.

In spite of the fact that the Holy Spirit is about bringing unity and reconciliation, in his letters Paul constantly finds himself compelled to address conflicts that have arisen in the local congregations he writes to.

In the verse immediately before our passage this morning he speaks of how the whole creation is "*in bondage to decay.*" In this passage speaks of our "*weakness*" – that frailty that is the human condition – of "*groaning inwardly*" and the fact that *we don't even know how to pray as we ought.*

I find myself far more readily identifying with Paul's vulnerable honesty than with the experience of those first apostles who witnessed the signs and wonders demonstrating the power of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

I am mindful of my body growing older -- my mind not being as quick as it once was.

I am aware of things I should be doing: I should walk more, get out in nature. I know I should let go of what in the big pictures are minor slights that bring resentment but sometimes I can't.

Sometimes I get discouraged. I work long hours and it can seem like I have little to show for it. So many prayers that seem to go unanswered. I find myself obsessing about what is going wrong rather than what is going right. One step forward, two steps back, at least that's how it seems sometimes.

And I look beyond my life at the newspapers, at this troubled world and there, too I find plenty of reason for discouragement.

I share this with you not so much to get your sympathy but by way of naming the fact that we are all in this together -- this "bondage to decay."

Unless you were blessed by God with a naturally sunny disposition that always sees the cup half full, you know what I am describing. And some of you carry burdens far heavier than mine. You know what I mean when I say there are times when the Holy Spirit seems like merely an abstraction -- a pious Bible word the reality of which we can see no signs of in our own lives.

And so since Paul makes it clear he knows quite well the experience I am describing my ears perk up when he speaks confident words of encouragement: he assures us that even when we feel lost and confused, when we have this feeling when we pray that we're just talking to ourselves, or that we don't even know what to pray for, the Holy Spirit is

nonetheless at work deep within, praying on our behalf, interceding before God on our behalf.

Now is the time for patience. He reminds us of the nature of hope. If we could see what we're waiting for, it wouldn't be hope.

And what we are patiently waiting for, what we are hoping for, is an altogether new creation. This is God's doing, not ours, and we can be assured it's coming.

Paul frames the suffering of this life as a kind of "birth pain" that not only we but the whole creation is going through. I've never been through the pain of a woman going through labor, the pain of birth. But I've witnessed it, and from what I'm told, it is pretty much the worst pain ever.

There was a funny Saturday night live sketch a week ago in which Amy Schumer plays a mother lying in bed on Mother's Day morning. Her young son comes into her room carrying a breakfast he has made for her with his father's help.

The mom declares, "I am so lucky to be your mom. The day you were born was the best day of my life!"

"Really?" says the son. "What was it like?"

"What was it like?!!" the mom says. "It was wonderful!"

Suddenly there is brief flashback to the same mom lying in a hospital bed screaming and total agony.

"Were you scared?" asks her son.

"Oh, no," lies the mom. "I had a big smile on my face the whole time."

Another brief flashback to that hospital bed and the woman is cursing out the doctor, cursing out her husband.

And it goes on for this for a while. You get the picture.

When the pain of labor was still relatively mild, a woman is sustained by the knowledge that this pain is leading to something wonderful. But there are moments when the pain eclipses everything.

And yet the mother didn't lie. Once the pain was over, and she held her baby in her arms, it was the best day of her life.

The pain of this life is birth pain. God is birthing a new creation.

There are two events at the heart of the Christian story. The first is the crucifixion of Jesus. When Jesus was dying on the cross, it was labor pain in which for a time all light is eclipsed. It is the part of the story that reminds us that yes, this is a very, very broken world we live in.

But then there is that second great event. The resurrection. In it, God gives the world the first sign of the new creation that is being birthed. Have no fear. This is where all that pain is headed.

Bear patiently this pain. Hold onto hope.

And along the way, if we are paying attention, we catch glimpses of the new creation that God is birthing.

Our youngest son Bobby graduated last week from college. There was a lot of joy associated with the celebration. Bobby hasn't always been the easiest child to raise. There were times as parents that what Sarah and I saw was mostly the darker side of Bobby's personality.

(That's how it is with parenting: Often parents see more of the darkness than the rest of the world gets to see.)

Bobby has a strong personality, with a strong-willed, stubborn streak in him. Along the way we've watched him make some bad choices that bore consequences that had to be dealt with. These were some hard times to go

through for him, and for us as parents. There were times when we loved our kid but we couldn't necessarily say we liked him.

To some extent what I'm talking about is the struggle all parents go through, especially when their kids are going through adolescence. Parents aren't easy. And some of you may have had to endure far worse.

But in recent months, culminating with his graduation, there's been this joyful sense of witnessing the person God always had in mind for Bobby begin to emerge. That strong-will of Bobby is getting more clearly focused in the right directions. And a significant part of this has had to do with the experiences that were tough to bear. We couldn't see it back then, but those were labor pains we were witnessing. It was all part of the new creation emerging.

There will surely be rough times yet ahead. The whole creation groans in travail.

But it is important to celebrate what Paul calls "the first fruits of the Spirit."

"For it is in hope that we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

<sup>26</sup>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.