

July 26, Ordinary 17A (Romans 8:26–39)

The Spirit is always seeking to pray on our behalf. Why didn't anyone tell me this in seminary?

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [July 2026](#) issue

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A clergy friend of mine had coffee with a young woman who was going through a hard time. She felt unable to pray about it, she said, because of her painful church upbringing—and a felt unworthiness before God. My friend told the young woman that God loved her and that she did not need to worry about praying. If she felt she could not pray, he and the parish would pray on her behalf.

That woman disappeared, as church visitors sometimes do, and my friend came to talk to me later about the experience. He had wanted this woman to feel loved and prayed for, but now he wondered if offering to pray for her took something away from her. We want to salve and solve, but sometimes what we need to do is to ask questions and to just listen to a person's struggle and their story.

What did prayer mean to this woman? What was her image of the God who she believed would not receive her prayers? What did she need in order to feel able to pray again, if she could at all?

My friend and I could also have turned to this Sunday's passage from Romans 8, in which Paul says that the Spirit is always praying for us—"with groanings too deep for words." According to Paul, the reality is that none of us knows how to pray "as we ought." Still, there is no need to worry—not because another human will pray on our behalf but because the Spirit will pray—through us. The Spirit, around us and within us, is always seeking to aid us and to pray on our behalf. Why did no one ever tell me this in seminary?

The mainline Protestant church I grew up in taught kids to pray, in that we memorized the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. We heard adults praying in church and before potluck suppers. But we did not talk much about the Holy Spirit, and we certainly never talked about praying to Jesus. While this was never spoken, I always understood that this was because those were things that *other* Christians did, Christians who we did not want to resemble in any way.

The people I have learned the most about prayer from over the years have been my parishioners. Nancy was a particularly wise saint in my life, elderly by the time I knew her. She had a way of telling stories about herself with a down-to-earth honesty and a spark of fire at the ridiculousness of human experience, all of which made the whole congregation adore her. Her sincere relationship with Jesus Christ was traditionally reverent; it was also a bit like two old friends who are on a cruise together.

Once, Nancy told me that she had woken up at two in the morning with the feeling that she absolutely must have ice cream. She got up without waking her husband and made her way down the stairs. But she tripped, and her frail body tumbled to the first floor. She lay in a jumbled pile for a moment, stunned. She scanned her limbs and wiggled her fingers, but she could not get up. So she prayed: "Well, Jesus, if you want me to get up, you're going to have to do it for me, because I sure can't."

She lay on the floor for about 20 minutes, and then she was able to get up. She went and got that bowl of ice cream, then went back to bed.

Another of my favorite prayers from Nancy: “Jesus, I can’t be normal today. You’re going to have to do it for me.” And to my knowledge, Jesus never let her down. So far, Jesus has always shown up for me, too—at least, when I remember to ask.

Why not teach children and adults in church that it’s all right when we can’t pray? That it is all right to need the Spirit to intercede for us in our weakness? Also, that it is all right—and sometimes even preferable—to ask Jesus to do something for us rather than try to do it ourselves. If you are like me, raised in a liberal, intellectual mainline church, you might never imagine telling someone with a struggle to “give it to Jesus.” But why not? It’s all right to need Jesus to give us strength or to help us get up when we can’t.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even our weakness and doubt. We may even get a bowl of ice cream at the end of it.