

“The Spirit’s Help”

“Roman Holiday” Series

Romans 8:18-25; Romans 8:26-20 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts and our lives to the gentle work of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

As we’ve worked our way through these few chapters of Romans, we’ve seen that Paul uses a lot of words. He repeats himself; he flips sentences around. Sometimes it seems like he’s saying the same thing over and over. And I think that verbal struggle is reflective of the difficulty Paul is having reconciling the way he thinks life in Christ should be with the way he knows life actually is. Evil continues to exist, despite God being Ultimate Love. Christ has redeemed all things, but the world is still broken. There’s a reason he seems to be going round and round. But as we move toward the end of chapter 8 here, he’s bringing in some new ideas and repeating himself less. We should probably sit up and pay attention here.

It’s not that there are fewer words, but they’ve gotten denser and less repetitive. This section we’ve gotten into today is the source of some theological traditions that we could rightfully critique as unhelpful. I’m looking at you, predestination! But there are also some occasions for wonderful breaths of fresh air in the midst of all these words. Paul may be at his very best when he’s talking about hope. “In hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” But he goes on to explain how it is

that he has arrived at hope, despite the furious struggle he's been describing for the last couple chapters. "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." That's the thing. Paul has made painfully clear that we can't do it on our own; even he can't do it on his own! But the good news is that we don't have to! The Spirit intercedes on our behalf!

I was thinking about how wonderful that is and how restorative just that one line about the Spirit interceding with sighs too deep for words feels to a harried, anxious heart, and I was trying to imagine how that might have anything to do with what is essentially a hidden-identity, light comedy from 70 years ago. This being the last sermon in our "Roman Holiday" series, I really wanted to make it work, but I wasn't sure it was possible. But then I started to think about how it all feels.

In the movie "Roman Holiday," Audrey Hepburn plays a princess who has escaped her country's embassy in Rome while on an official tour of Europe. The problem is that this young princess has been sheltered and closely controlled her entire life. She has no cash; she barely knows how paying for things works. She's wandering around a big city, with no experience, no guide, and basically no savvy. In other words, she's extremely vulnerable and pretty clueless, but mostly unaware of it. I wonder if there's something about that that feels familiar? Have you ever felt like you don't really understand the world at all? Like everyone else got an instruction manual, but yours got

lost in the mail? This is us, as Paul describes us, “for we do not know how to pray as we ought.”

What gets even more interesting is that once people realize there’s a clueless princess on the loose, two different forces are set in motion trying to protect her. At the embassy, frantic calls are made back to Her Highness’s “home country,” resulting in an airplane full of black-suited secret agents, who are supposed to blend into the crowds in Rome and exfiltrate the princess with a minimum of fuss. Luckily for the viewers, it turns out this army of undertaker-lookalikes is not well suited to the task. But not for lack of trying. I would suggest that this official attempt to bring the princess home safely represents how we so often try to corral our own spirits by force, without acknowledging why we went wandering in the first place or what we might gain from our adventure. Sometimes we even try to do this to others! And honestly, whether we’re approaching our own spiritual journeys this way or trying to control someone else’s, we end up looking as foolish as the black-suited men in this movie, even if we don’t get a guitar smashed over our heads.

The Holy Spirit doesn’t intercede in our lives with the authoritarian force of a cadre of black-suited agents. I might like to say that Joe Bradley, the American reporter played by Gregory Peck, offers the alternative, showing us how the Spirit works, but if it were that simple, it wouldn’t be nearly as good a movie. Joe Bradley’s motives are not pure. Once he discovers that the oddly naïve but charming young woman he’s been harboring is the Princess, he both knows that he’d better make sure no harm comes to

her, so as to avoid getting in trouble, but he also has the prospect of a big pay-off if he can write up an exclusive story about a princess's day off in Rome.

The Holy Spirit does not intervene in our lives to make a buck or to keep from getting in trouble. It's not the why in this example that seems instructive to me, but the multi-layered how. Joe Bradley knows that he has to use a light touch, or he will spook the princess. I'm pretty sure he has that in common with the Holy Spirit. For a bit, he follows her from a distance, seeing what she's going to do on her own. As the day goes by, he becomes more interested in just helping her enjoy a wonderful day and less motivated to be undercover paparazzi. Eventually, he does, in fact, intercede on her behalf, when they're taken in by the police for causing chaos and damage when the Princess loses control of the Vespa they'd rented. He takes the risk of flashing his American News Service ID to get them off the hook, later explain to the princess that "if you say you're a reporter, you can get away with anything."

So in a sense, Joe Bradley is providing the sort of from-a-distance, gentle prodding we sometimes recognize as the Spirit's modus operandi. But there's another side of this dynamic that seems important to me. And it's not about how the Spirit works in our lives, but about how it sometimes feels when the Spirit is working in our lives. You see, Joe Bradley is broke. Is it because he plays too much poker? Quite possibly, but that's not the point. He needs the pay-off that would come from an exclusive story about a princess because he's deep in debt to his boss. So for him to show a princess around town, in a way she will enjoy, he's scrapping and scraping every

minute to make it work. He calls his photographer friend Irving to meet them at the café, and then takes him inside to shake him down for cash. “She’s out there now drinking champagne I can’t pay for!” he desperately tells Irving.

Sometimes when things are shifting in our lives, it can feel like we’re barely holding it together. And even if we do recognize the gentle prodding of the Spirit, moving us in the right direction, opening the right doors, it can also feel like the bridge over the chasm that’s opened up in our lives appears only just barely in time to give us safe passage. Sometimes, the Spirit’s work requires that we ask for help. Sometimes, the Spirit’s work happens when we take risks. Sometimes, the scariest times in our lives are the ones most likely to look like the Spirit was present when we look back on them.

One could argue that rather than casting Joe Bradley as the Holy Spirit in this movie, it would make more sense to say William Wyler, the director, and Dalton Trumbo, the writer, were in that role. They, after all, were the ones who gave the princess a beautiful day that ended with a safe return home. You’ll notice I didn’t say “a happy ending.” Perhaps we can learn from imagining Wyler and Trumbo as the Holy Spirit, precisely because of what they didn’t do with this film. You heard me say a few weeks ago that I love this movie very much, but hold a firm conviction that they got the ending wrong. It’s not the happy ending I was expecting. Rather than everyone’s problems being resolved, sacrifices are required and given. The gift of showing someone how they impacted your life is given. Growth is demonstrated. Advantage that could

have been taken is instead relinquished. These are probably more holy outcomes than the “Hollywood” ending I wanted.

Paul tells us that “all things work together for good for those who love God.” But we know he knows it’s more complicated than that. While we may not agree with some of the ways Paul interprets life or some of the ways Christian tradition has built on his writings, we hear him write about futility and the groaning of all creation and waiting, and we recognize all that. Life often feels like it’s barely holding together. We rarely get the happy endings we want. Sacrifice is required. But there’s hope, Paul says! There’s hope because the Spirit is interceding. And whether we recognize it or not, it’s there, guiding us, following us, sometimes making plans for us that we walk right into without knowing. It’s helping us grow. It’s helping us let go. It’s helping us live life fully alive. It’s helping us give thanks, even when we’re giving some things up. Not by forcing us into the unmarked car of rigid morality, but by gently accompanying us, watching out for us, and helping us become who God intends for us to be. Hallelujah and Amen!