

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. William L. (Roy) Hills on the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 24, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Ultimate Intercessor

I am hopeful of making it to the Kingdom of Heaven talked about in the Gospel Lesson for today. (Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52) But, I do admit that I need help. I am not a "self-made-man." I am very skeptical of any man or woman who claims to be a "self-made-person." In my younger years I once described myself as a "self-made-man" and a person commented. "Well, you could have done better." I am sure now that I have received grace upon grace, blessing upon blessing from God. Also, so many times in my life I have had people who have intervened for me, helped me, and even saved me from the brink of disaster. Has that been true for you? Have you ever needed an intercessor? Have you ever needed someone to intercede for you...to help you?

Well, that's what today's sermon is about. I have had people say to me, "Christianity is just a crutch. It's for people who are weak and need help, who can't stand on their own two feet, who can't make it by themselves" to which I say, "You're absolutely right." The strength of Christianity is in recognizing our own weaknesses and that we can't do it all by ourselves. I need a loving God and I need loving neighbors. I have needed an intercessor, and I do need an intercessor.

I believe God is "for us" and Jesus loves us. Let's take a look at the lesson from Romans (Romans 8:26-39) It is indeed a powerful testimony from Paul. You may want to follow this in your service bulletin.

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. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

And at the close of that passage from Romans, which I urge you to read again, it is written,

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

Today I want to share with you a dream or a vision about this passage from Romans that has stuck with me over the years and given me hope. It was my time to preach at the seminary—...and that was a tough place to preach. We called it "The Pit." All the faculty and seminarians waiting to critique your sermon, and I was scared! Perhaps that is why I dreamed this vision. So today I want to tell you about my imaginings.

I was thinking about judgment and charges brought against me and condemnation, maybe not doing so well and things like that...And about Jesus being my intercessor.

I imagined that we were all in a church—or maybe it was a courtroom. It was a big courtroom...elaborate...ornate...it was a nice large room. It was like the Supreme Court. The judge looked a little like Bishop Salmon only not nearly as congenial and he was a real stickler for the law. But also the judge looked a little like Charlton Heston as Moses or like Michelangelo's God from the Sistine Chapel. The judge was an imposing figure. The prosecutors were St. Augustine, St. Peter and St. James. The jury consisted of 12 saints who looked very much like my seminary professors, although some of them looked like people I had offended over the years. I didn't have an attorney for the defense; I was in charge of my own defense and there were others in the room. Each one of us would be put on trial and in charge of our own defense. It was like we were all on trial. Our cases would be called and each of us would stand up and present our case. And suddenly it was my turn to present my case. I raised my hand and took the oath and took my seat as St. Peter and St. Augustine and St. James started to interrogate me.

St. Peter began, "Have you loved the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind?" I said, "Yes" whereupon the whole jury and judge and all the audience broke into laughter. St. Peter continued, "Have you loved your neighbors as yourself?" and I said, "Well, I've tried to" and the jury, the 12 saints cupped their hands over their mouths and ears and shook their heads. All the other people in the courtroom pointed their fingers at me in derision and sneered.

Then it was St. Augustine's turn, "Do you have faith that can move mountains?" he asked. "Tell me what you really believe." It was getting pretty tense and frustrating on that witness stand...I was beginning to sweat a little and get anxious.

Then it was St. James' turn and as you know, St. James said, "Faith without works is dead." St. James asked, "What proof is there in your life that you have fed the sheep?" and before I could answer that question, he popped another, "How have you lived your life to demonstrate that you love Jesus?" And just as I was about to give an answer to that St. James asked another, "List the fruits of your labor as a Christian!" and there was a rumbling and murmuring in the courtroom and James sat down and St. Peter back up in my face...firing questions at me and always too fast for me to get out an answer. The judge would say, "Just answer the question Mr. Hills" and that was the way it went. St. Peter firing questions at me..."Has the church been better off or worse off because you have been a priest? Which did you love more, the church or the Gospel?" faster and faster the questions came. St. Augustine firing away questions about theology and faith, St. Peter convicting me with questions about my life as a Christian and then St. James picking me apart about my work, or failures in work, those things which I ought to have done but had not, and those things which I ought not to have done, but had done.

The intensity built and built: the prosecutors firing the questions at me, me making a feeble attempt to answer the question, my detractors in the courtroom laughing at and wagging their fingers, the ones I had offended and sinned against jeering. Then before I could get out an intelligent response, another question! Faster and faster. More intense and more intense. Now the sweat was just pouring off my brow. I was breathing rapidly. I was really under stress. Faster and faster came the questions. More intense. I thought I would collapse under the weight of it all. I knew I was going to be convicted and sentenced to an awful fate, maybe sent to a bad place. The jury shaking their heads and wagging their fingers...It was awful.

Then the big doors at the entrance of the courtroom were flung open and everybody turned to see what had happened. A regular looking guy in a T-shirt and blue jeans stood in the middle of the doorway. Written on the T-shirt were the words **ULTIMATE INTERCESSOR**. It seemed as if time stood still. He walked through the court room, bowed respectfully to the judge, said "Well done" to Peter, and "Keep the faith" to Augustine and to James, "You keep working at it James." Then he approached the witness stand where this anxious, sweaty person was sitting—me—and he took me by the hand and walked me in front of the judge and said, "If it's alright with you daddy, I'd like to declare this a mistrial and take this person with me." The judge nodded and we turned and walked out the doors of that courtroom and into the light. And as we walked along I realized that I had been freed and saved despite my sins and offenses. I turned and looked at Jesus, trying to express to Him my appreciation...trying to say something intelligent and comprehensible and I said, "Man, I really dig your T-shirt!" And He looked into my heart and said, "I love you."

"It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us."