

On Behalf of Another

Each week, during Sunday morning worship, we take time to share our joys, concerns, and prayer requests, confident that we are among friends who will pray for us and for those we are concerned about. But why do we make prayer requests, and what do we hope will happen as a result? Almost always, our requests involve an illness, problem, or situation that needs healing, and healing was one of the most important aspects of Jesus' ministry.

In our gospel reading, Jesus heals the servant of a Roman centurion. After that, he heals Peter's mother-in-law, and then, that same evening, he heals many are brought to him to be cured of illness and possession by demons. These healings happen because family and friends intercede. They bring their sick friend or family member to Jesus, pushing their way through the crowd, on behalf of those who want to be well. It's really quite astonishing that a Roman centurion, a military officer in the Roman occupation forces, would ask for help from an itinerant Jewish teacher and healer. And yet he laid aside the tremendous gulf between them out of his care and compassion for his servant. The sick, in these stories, would not have been healed if someone hadn't chosen to intercede on their behalf.

It is important to pay attention to this, because it is this go-between role that we take on when we offer intercessory prayer. Most simply put, intercessory prayer is prayer in which we bring the needs of others to God, just as people brought the sick to Jesus. Richard Foster, in his book *Prayer*, calls intercessory prayer *a sacred obligation—and a precious privilege*. We take up this sacred obligation and precious privilege out of our love for others— a love that desires more for them than we, ourselves, have the power to give. And when we intercede for another, we join our love with God's love, our desire for another's healing and wholeness with God's desire for their healing and wholeness. As Douglas Steere writes, in the article, "Intercession: Caring for Souls," *when we begin to pray intercession is already actively operating. When I enter the prayer of intercession, I do it with the acute realization that I am only adding my caring to the cosmic love of a God who cares.*

But if this is a God who cares, why do we need to intercede? Why doesn't God see the problem and fix it? Why do we have to ask? I found myself struggling with this question when I was in seminary and was doing a summer chaplaincy unit at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. I believed that we are called to pray for each other, particularly in times of need, and I had also seen, both in my own experience, and in the results of several well-designed studies, that somehow, at least some of the time, prayer seems to "work." But I'd never really asked the question of whether our prayers were not just kind, but necessary.

And then I met a young man who came into the hospital after breaking his neck in a swimming accident. He'd had so much going for him. He was just finishing a doctorate and was engaged to be married at the end of the summer. And now he was abruptly confronted with the prospect of spending the rest of his life paralyzed from the neck down. His fiancée's mother came to the chaplaincy office asking for help. Neither family was religious, but she thought he needed someone to talk to outside the circle his own rather overbearing family.

I first saw him the day before he was scheduled to have surgery to stabilize his neck. As we talked, he shared his shock and fear in a way that touched me deeply. He was far less concerned for himself than for the others whose lives would be affected by his accident. He found it particularly discouraging that he had absolutely no sensation in his arms or hands. Sometimes people with injuries like his retain enough sensation in one or both upper limbs to be able to use adaptive devices that greatly increase their independence. It would make a big difference to him to have at least some use of an arm or a hand.

That night, as I drifted on the edge of sleep, I was seized—I can think of no other word for it—I was *seized* by the need to pray for this young man. It felt like something completely beyond my willing—I was *compelled* to pray. And my prayer, seemingly of its own accord, took a very unique form. I lay for what seemed like a long time, visualizing his spinal cord as a slender column of light, with darkness at the injured place. And I imagined threads of light passing back and forth across the darkness, knitting the separated parts together.

When I went into the hospital the next day, I saw the young man's sister in the hall. She said that he had told her, just before he went down to surgery that morning, that he had some feeling in his left arm. I was stunned. Was this just coincidence? I don't really know. But when asked about the effectiveness of prayer, Anglican Archbishop William Temple commented, *All I can say is that when I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don't, they don't*. I had prayed, and this amazing and wonderful "coincidence" had happened.

The power of my experience during the night convinced me that my prayer was important—even necessary. But why did *I* need to pray for this man? Was it because his non-religious family and friends didn't? Seemingly I was chosen because someone needed to pray for him, but why? The best answer I could come up with has to do with our human freedom. Perhaps, as much as God wants to heal us, God's spirit of healing won't go to work unless this is what we want, too. As Douglas Steere says, *In all things love invites but refuses to compel*.

Our response to God's love must be freely chosen and our cries for help come out of our trust in God's desire for our wholeness. And, whether we recognize it or not, we are all so deeply interconnected in the *being* of God, that we can feel and express the longing of another as well as our own longing for wholeness. Our prayer, our cry, our call for God's assistance, frees God's Spirit to provide that assistance. If this is true, then our intercessions take on an importance that is almost more than we can imagine. According to New Testament scholar Walter Wink,

. . . if we . . . take the biblical understanding seriously, we find that intercession changes the world and it changes what is possible to God. It creates an island of relative freedom in a world gripped by an unholy necessity . . . An aperture opens in the praying person permitting God to act without violating human freedom. The change in one person thus changes what God can thereby do in that world.

Do any of you find this a little overawing? I know that I do. If my intercessions can somehow change “what is possible to God,” is there anything more important for me to do than to pray? This reminds me of a television program I saw, years ago, where someone rather snarkily questioned a group of cloistered nuns about how much good they were *really* doing in the world, living apart from it behind high walls. One of the sisters gently responded that if you believed, as they did, in God’s sovereignty and in the power of prayer, then the prayers they offered every day made just as much of a contribution to the good of the world as any activity they could engage in. Perhaps, as this sister suggests, there is no ministry more vital than that of offering ourselves on behalf of others in God’s cosmic work of healing.

But, but, but . . . I imagine some of you thinking, doesn’t this presuppose a God who intervenes? And what if we are uncomfortable with an “interventionist” God, like Marcus Borg, who asks, Given all of the horrible things that happen, does the notion that God ever intervenes make any sense? If we believe that God intervenes, how do we explain the fact that God seems to answer some prayers and not others? Borg writes, *Think of all the people who prayed for deliverance from the Holocaust, all the people who prayed for peace and safety in the midst of war, all the people who prayed for healing—and whose prayers were not answered.*

He goes on to say, though, that he continues to pray for himself and for others. Why? Because such prayers *seem like a natural form of caring. Not to do them would seem like an absence of love.* Moreover Borg notes, prayers for healing, and other kinds of prayer, for reasons not satisfactorily explained, do sometimes have an affect. Refusing either interventionist or psychosomatic answers, he is content to leave the explanation in the realm of mystery. To refuse to pray because he can’t figure out how prayer works would be, he believes, an act of intellectual pride. . . . *regardless of their efficacy, he writes, petition and intercession serve the central purpose of prayer: intimacy with God.*

This brings me to the effect of praying on those who pray. Saying “yes” to the go-between role of intercessory prayer, according to Steere, *involves the willingness to assume the spiritual costs of entering into a measureless involvement in the caring for another.* You will become more aware of the sufferings and sorrows of others, and your caring for them will deepen with your prayer. You may also find yourself becoming more actively involved in the lives of those you pray for, realizing that, as well as your prayers, they may need the gift of a visit, or a meal, or a ride to a doctor’s appointment.

And as we pray and seek God’s healing for others, we may also be moved to seek our own healing and to surrender ourselves more fully to God. This is expressed beautifully in the movie,

Shadowlands, which tells the story of C.S. Lewis and his marriage to Joy Gresham. When Joy is dying of cancer, one of Lewis's friends asks him about prayer. Lewis responds,

Prayer? I pray all the time these days. If I stopped praying, I think I'd stop living.

And God hears your prayers, doesn't He? his friend asks.

That's not why I pray, Harry, Lewis tells him, I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me.

Allowing ourselves to be changed by prayer can be painful, at times, but it can also bring great joy—the joy of caring for others, the joy of a deepening intimacy with God, and the joy of being knit together with all the others, both here and around the world, who also take up this ministry of prayer.

I'd like to close with a story that expresses some of this joy. It was told by a friend who was part of a prayer chain I once belonged to. She wrote:

Last summer a good friend of mine had a stroke and friends and family immediately asked her parish and several parishes in the city where she lives to pray for her. She did not recover completely from the stroke, her peripheral vision was lost, but this was much less damage than had been expected at first. She has told me how much it meant to her to know that she was being upheld in prayer by so many people. How each day her hope and courage were bolstered by this knowledge. Recently she went to a potluck at one of the city churches where prayers had been said for her. Most of the people there were strangers and she introduced herself to those at her table. She wept when one said to her, "I know you. I prayed for you."

What a gift to know and be known in this way.

Amen.