

## Prayers of the Passion: “Simon, I have prayed for you...”

Luke 22:31-32

#12-11-1216

I recently read the story of a man who was taking a morning walk when a garbage truck pulled up beside him. He thought the driver was going to ask for directions. Instead, the driver showed the man a picture of a cute little five-year-old boy. “This is my grandson, Jeremiah,” the driver said. “He’s on life-support in a Phoenix hospital.” Thinking the driver would next ask for a contribution to his hospital bills, the man reached for his wallet. But the driver wanted something more than money. He said, “I’m asking everybody I can to say a prayer for him. Would you say a prayer for Jeremiah, please?” The man promised he would and his day took on a whole new meaning.

“Say a prayer for someone,” that’s called intercessory prayer. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to intercessory prayer by no one less than Jesus himself. Throughout this Lenten series on Prayers of the Passion, we have been looking at people in crisis situations and their responses.

In our text for today from Luke, Jesus told Simon Peter, the leader of the disciples, He was praying for him, not because Peter was so important, but because he was so weak. One of Peter’s weaknesses was he trusted in his own strength. Just prior to this scripture, after the last supper, Peter and the others were arguing about who was the greatest! Peter thought he was invulnerable. He wasn’t prepared to deal with the temptations that were soon to come.

Don’t we also often say to ourselves, “I’m strong enough to deal with any situation,” only to discover we are suddenly out of our depth, and our strength and wisdom are not enough. We either fall flat or get into big trouble. That’s what happened to Peter. The story of Peter’s desertion and denial of Jesus when Jesus was arrested is told over and over again. Peter needed the prayers of Jesus not to give up in despair and in time they were answered. After the resurrection, Peter grew deeper in the faith. Humbled by his failures and empowered by God’s forgiveness, he became an effective leader of the new Christian Church.

Our scripture today, however, is not the only example of Jesus’ intercession. During his ministry he prayed for those who were mentally, physically or spiritually ill. In John, chapter 17, Jesus prayed for his friends, the disciples. And then from the cross he prayed for his enemies, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:24)

Jesus is our best role model of intercessory prayer, but there are many others in scripture. The first Christian martyr was Stephen. His last words were an intercession on behalf of those who were stoning him to death. The apostle Paul prayed constantly for the struggling young Christian Church and for the believers.

Intercessory prayer is obviously very important, so let’s look a little deeper. Intercession is primarily prayer for others, but it’s not words of glittering generality to “heal the sick and bless the world.” Intercession is when we personally invite the power and presence of God to be evident in some specific person or situation. We cast our weakness before God’s strength on behalf of another.

One of the most comforting facts for me about prayer is we don’t have to pray alone. We don’t have to struggle to “get it right.” Paul teaches us there is

Someone else praying with us: the Holy Spirit. Paul writes, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches (our hearts) knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” (Romans 8: 26, 27)

Now don’t get me wrong. Even with the help of the Holy Spirit prayer is still work. Maybe that’s why we put it off or forget so often. It takes discipline to make time to commune with God. It takes time and energy to be sensitive to the needs of others. It takes a willingness to grow in the faith and to learn more about God and this mystery called prayer. One good book that teaches about prayer is this book that is in our church library. It’s Philip Yancy’s book, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference*. We have it at home. There are many good books on the topic.

But let me be clear, prayer is not a means to change God’s mind, but to come into relationship with God. We bring people and situations to God and surrender them to God’s care, trusting God’s will and timing. Think of it like this: When we take our requests to God, we “*Lift them up; Lay them down; and then Let them go.*” That’s not easy, and we may need to do it many times, but it IS necessary.

Merlin Carothers, author of several books on prayer, has written a helpful reminder, “If you want God to do things for you, do not hinge your faith on what He does for you. I know of no quicker way to stop God from working in your life (or someone else’s) than for you to insist you will believe AFTER He does what you want.” Remember, as I said before, surrender is key, God doesn’t bargain.

Regardless of the end result or answer, Jesus taught we are to pray and we are to pray for others. We know that, but I’m not sure we really understand how important it is. I know I don’t understand everything about prayer. I do know intercessory prayer is an act of faith and a sign of our obedience. It’s also a matter of love. It demonstrates our relationship with God and is an expression of our caring for others. It helps to keep us from being so self-centered.

When we learn to regard it as the highest part of the work entrusted to us, we will see there is nothing we need to practice more than prayer. Someone once said he believed when he got to heaven one of the things he would say would be, “Why didn’t I pray more.” I agree.

Even though we don’t know why God chooses to answer some prayers specifically, perhaps even miraculously, and others are left waiting, when we see the power of intercessory prayer at work, it encourages us to “keep on praying.” Let me share a personal experience from our family.

Twenty years ago July 6<sup>th</sup> this summer our son, Mark, was water skiing with his college friends on Lake Erie. When diving off the boat he hit a sand bar with his head and was instantly paralyzed from the neck down. Eventually, he was life-flighted to Cleveland Metro hospital where after surgery he remained for a month in rehab therapy. We then transferred him to the rehab center in Good Samaritan Hospital in Cincinnati where we were living at the time. He remained there for another four months. He regained enough use of his hands and arms to be independent, but he was designated as an “incomplete quad.”

Many people prayed for Mark after the accident. In addition, before leaving the hospital to return home for outpatient therapy, we decided to have a healing service based on the book, *Blessed to Be A Blessing*, by a fellow United Methodist minister and friend, Rev. James Wagner. His book talks about not just physical healing, but the healing of **body, mind, spirit, and relationships**.

We invited many of the people, youth and adult, to the service who had a meaningful relationship with Mark, including his primary nurse at the hospital, a Franciscan brother named Brother Jim. It was a time of sharing thoughts and stories, anointing with oil, and intercessory prayer.

So what happened? I'll tell you first what didn't happen. Mark didn't get out of his wheelchair and walk out of the hospital. But now, let me tell you what DID happen--in God's time. Before long, it was clear Mark did not experience the deep depression many spinal cord injury patients endure. He never blamed God for his accident or turned his back on his faith. He never adopted a "poor me" attitude, expecting others to take care of him.

By spring quarter, nine months after the accident, he was back in college, living independently and driving a car with hand controls. He graduated the next year in math education and began teaching high school math. He could no longer play his favorite sports, soccer and basketball, but he coached at both the middle and high school levels. He completed his Masters degree in sports administration at Xavier University and five years ago was hired as the athletic director of the Milford school district. He's done it all from a wheelchair.

Not only that, his college sweetheart, Cobin, stuck with him and they married. They now have two children, Lydia and Jude, who are three and one. His life is still difficult but so are all of our lives for one reason or another.

I'm not sure how you would categorize all of this, but we think it's a miracle by the grace of God. We believe those intercessory prayers were answered because we have seen hope and healing way beyond the physical. He was blessed and has been a blessing. It could only be God, and we are thankful.

I'm sure we all have stories of answered prayer. There are also times we haven't received the answers in the time or form we hoped for, but we are told, **PRAY ANYWAY**. Prayer was Jesus' first response, not his last resort. As I said last week, that's how it should be for us as well.

Jesus' whole reason for being born was to be a living intercession and bring oneness to a rebellious humankind and a righteous God. During this Lenten season we particularly focus on the cross, the means by which we obtained forgiveness of all sin and came into a relationship with a loving God. But it didn't end at the cross. In Hebrews we read, "He ever lives to make intercession for us." (Hebrews 7:25). His standing in the gap between heaven and earth in intercession for us today is as important and as real as His reconciling work on the cross.

If it's important to him, it should be important for us. I thought today, since we were focusing on a specific kind of prayer, that it might be helpful to share intercession together as a community of faith. We often think of "folding our

hands” to pray, but I want you to lay your hands out on your lap before you and as I speak, sense them and let them be your prayer guide as we pray together.

**Let us pray:**

**First**, think of your thumb; it's closest to you. If we are not faithful to remember to pray for those we care for the most, who will? So, begin your prayer by praying silently for those who are closest to you. **(Silence)**

**Second**, think of your pointing finger. Pray for those who point others in the right direction, like counselors, teachers, doctors, and ministers. **(Silence)**

**Third**, is your tallest finger. It reminds us of our leaders. Pray for the President and our national government, our city government, leaders in business and industry, your boss, the leaders of this church. **(Silence)**

**Fourth** is your ring finger. Surprising to many is the fact that this is our weakest finger, as any piano teacher will testify. It should remind us to pray for those who are weak, in trouble or in pain. **(Silence)**

**Fifth** is your little finger, the smallest of all, the way we often feel in the presence of an omnipotent God, but it is still important. This finger should remind us to pray for ourselves and our needs, but by the time we have prayed for the other four groups, our needs will be put into proper perspective and we will be able to pray for ourselves more effectively. **(Silence)**

**Lord**, we all come before you in need of your love and grace. We trust your power and presence to be with each need and person we have mentioned. Our lives are in YOUR capable hands. Thank you. In the name of the Christ who died for us and taught us to pray for others and in the power of the Holy Spirit who intercedes with sighs far deeper than we can utter, we all say together: **AMEN.**