

"PRAYING FOR OTHERS"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street, NYC, NY  
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World Communion Sunday

INTRODUCTION

The telephone call tells you that somebody very dear to you in another part of the country is critically ill in the hospital. The family calls you because they want you to know. What do you say? Well, you say "I'm sorry"...and you express your concern that this has happened. You ask for the details, hoping to hear something reassuring, some basis for the word of hope. But not much is given. The person's life is hanging there in the balance; there's nothing you can do. It's impossible for you to get there. It's out of your hands. The only thing you can say is, "I'll be praying for you". And - you do. And you may wonder privately to yourself, does it do any good?

DEVELOPMENT

Intercessory prayer means praying for others. Let's think about it this morning. I've chosen two examples from the Scriptures to get us into the subject. First, from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is confronting Peter with his inclination for promising more than he could deliver. Peter, like some of us, was always filled with enthusiasm when the plans were being made, but when the plans had to be carried out some of the enthusiasm waned. Jesus says to him, "I am praying for you".

And then in the Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, Paul begins his letter with a little bit of boasting about his suffering. Suffering was the membership card for the apostle. You weren't allowed into that select fraternity unless you could show some wounds and have a few arrests and imprisonments behind you. So Paul was establishing his authority as an Apostle with the Corinthians by flashing around his credentials. Listen to what he says:

"For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself."

Then he expressed his faith that he was delivered out of this peril by the hand of God and that God will always deliver him. That kind of statement was typical of Paul; mind you, he had a reckless faith in the providence of God. He could go into the stickiest of situations, confident that God's providence would always be with him. No matter what happened, he believed he'd come out all right. You read Paul and you have the distinct impression that that's all Paul ever needs - that "amazing" faith...that we envy.

And so he surprises us when he pens that line in verse 11 of Chapter I of II Corinthians, "You also must help us by prayer".

DOES IT DO ANY GOOD

Praying for others. Intercessory prayer. Does it do any good to pray for others? I confess to you that I came to the conclusion at the mature age of 18 or so that it really didn't do much good. From my understanding of the world at that age there was no way that it could possibly work. It impressed me as a bit of superstition. And - although I don't think I shall ever be as smart again as I was at the age of 18, nevertheless my experiences across recent years have taught me a couple of things at this point. One is that intercessory prayer does do good. And the other: intercessory prayer is the authentically Christian prayer.

Other kinds of prayer are helpful as spiritual disciplines. It's good for us to praise God; it's good to give thanks to God. It's good for us to confess our sins to God. It's good to ask God for His forgiveness. But all of this is a kind of "self-discipline" - a communion with God that strengthens our own personal life. We ought always to do this, but it is not yet sufficiently Christian. The authentic Christian prayer is intercession, because it's a way of following the commandment of Jesus "to love your neighbor". Intercessory prayer.

LIFE IS INTER-RELATED

I want to say three things about it - not as a proof for it...because you can't prove it, but as a way of encouraging you to try it. And the first thing is that all life is interrelated, and that's what makes intercessory prayer possible.

It has been over 300 years since John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's in London, wrote these lines:

"No man is an island entire of itself.  
Every man is a piece of the continent - a part of the main,  
If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less.  
Any man's death diminishes me  
Because I am involved in mankind.  
Therefore send not to know for whom the bell tolls,  
It tolls for thee."

The interrelatedness of life. We are involved in mankind. World Communion Sunday which we celebrate today brings this to mind. It's what makes compassion possible. Compassion is the capacity in human beings to "get outside of themselves", and to perhaps feel what others are feeling. Compassion has no boundaries and knows no distance. You can feel for somebody in a far-off land half way around the globe. Some suffering there touches our lives in such a way that we want to reach out and touch them, to help them in their need.

Miracles of compassion do occur in our time. We've shared in them and reached out and helped...and touched...and lifted life in the spirit of our Lord.

The great Biblical story of Creation at the beginning of the Bible reminds us that we are all related, that we all come from a common ancestor, that we're united, cousins with others. Perhaps it was this that prompted Emerson to write:

"When a man reaches out for the larger meaning of an idea, he discovers that all men are talking about the same thing..."

And Robert Frost it was who wrote those memorable lines:

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen groundswell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps that even two could pass abreast".

Something there is that wants us to be one, that keeps pulling us together with the delicate filaments of the web of life. The interrelatedness of life; that's what makes intercession possible. That's the first thing I want to emphasize.

SEPARATED FROM EACH OTHER

Secondly, at the same time we know that we are separated from each other. While you may sense that "no man is an island", you also know that we spend a lot of time in isolation from each other. So while our oneness makes intercession possible, our isolation makes intercession necessary. Sometimes the only way we can touch another human being is through prayer. Have you ever thought of that?

Language is called communication. Communication is the human attempt to build community, and both words have the same root - the word "communion". Language is intended to build a bridge between people. Sometimes it doesn't do it. In fact, some of the time our efforts to communicate with others simply remind us of our isolation. And people are lonely, as it said on the bulletin board of the Church in recent weeks, because they build walls instead of bridges.

We speak our hearts to somebody with whom we want to be close, united and to be one with them. And our speech is like tapping on the walls of our cell, hoping that somebody's there and will answer. Yet the words that so often come back to us reveal that they don't really understand us and that just makes our isolation all the more painful.

A woman says of her husband, "We've lived together for years. He sits next to me; he sleeps next to me. I can reach out and touch him. But it's as if he's not there". Or the Beatles sad, ironic song, "She's leaving home after living alone alone for so long".

Or when we're talking to somebody and they reveal something about themselves or perhaps about their attitude toward life and people that all of a sudden creates an uneasy feeling in us and it's as if a wall suddenly springs up between us. We quickly discover we don't know what to say to them any more. We're separated from them. We find it difficult to continue to talk to them; we want to walk away from them.

This is the human condition. We are interrelated and yet - isolated. We want to be one, but we are unable to bridge the gap between us. And there is little we can do then except to pray. For our interrelatedness makes prayer possible, and our separation makes it necessary. And pray we better!

BELIEVE IN GOD MAKES INTERCESSION HAPPEN

And this brings us to our final point. It is our belief in God that makes intercession happen. Suppose that God is not up there, is not some entity separated from you and me, but suppose God is the One "in whom we live and move and have our being?" Suppose, in other words, God is Spirit, and that's why we are never completely isolated from one another - because the same spirit that touches my life also touches your life? And it does!

Our belief in God is what makes intercession happen. There's no evidence of that that's going to convince the skeptic. God is not some object in this world that can be examined and tested. But there is sufficient testimony to assert that "every act of intercession affects the situation toward which it is directed so that it creates a new situation". Prayer helps to create a new situation. That famous word was written some 40 years ago by a man named George Stewart. Let me read his words to you:

"Circumstances are often changed. Even if they are unchanged, hearts are changed, and if hearts are changed, then circumstances can be transformed...for a time things may seem to go on much as before, but the decisive power has entered the situation. And prayer always creates a new situation."

So we pray because we can't help but pray. Our interrelatedness makes prayer possible. Our separation makes it necessary. And finally, our belief in God who is closer than breathing and nearer than hands and feet - as Tennyson put it - makes it happen!

CLOSING STORY

William Butler Yeats wrote a poem about an old Irish priest names Peter Gilligan. Gilligan was a faithful priest, a good priest, but he had a heavy burden to carry as the pastor of the parish. And besides, he was not getting on in years and would often come home at night tired out, exhausted, drained. One night he came home and received a call from a woman saying that her husband was dying and would he please come over and be with them. He complained to himself. He didn't want to go. But he was a priest. He had to go. So he knelt down beside his chair and prayed to God to give him the strength to do his job, to bless him on this mission, this call of mercy.

And then - lo and behold - he fell asleep, only to awaken at dawn, upset and terrified that the man had already died. Ashamed at his own reliability, he got up and hurried as quickly as he could to that home. And when he arrived the man's wife met him with a smile and said, "Oh Father....thank you for coming again; he died peacefully just after you left."

And Peter Gilligan realized that somehow, in the great mystery of God, the man and his wife actually believed what he had been there...and that God had made up for his shortcomings in a way he would never understand. And the poem closes with these lines:

"He who hath made the night of stars  
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It's my belief that praying for others does make a difference. In the great mystery of God, it always creates a new situation. And we should do it more than we now do and there is no better time to begin than here...and now.. and in the quietness of this sanctuary.

LET US PRAY

Our thoughts and prayers, O God, move out to include others - loved ones from whom we may be separated by distance, but not separated by prayer this morning. We pray, too, for those here at home who are hurting as well as those in distance places. Move in our hearts. And make our wills strong that we may respond to the needs of others in creative and meaningful ways that make a difference. We pray for the bereaved in our midst, for those who have lost loved ones this past week.

On this World Communion Sunday, help us to feel our oneness and our closeness to all of your children throughout the world. May the bread and the wine open our eyes to the very presence of the living Christ among us. Bind us more closely to each other and to Him and lift up our hearts and minds to you, O God, that we may depart from here - renewed in body, soul...and fed, nourished and made new. Amen.

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On this world communion Sunday, help us to feel our oneness and our closeness to all your children through the world. May the bread and wine open our eyes to the presence of the living Christ among us. Bind us more closely to each other and to Him and lift up our hearts and minds to You, O God, that we may depart from here - renewed in body and soul, fed, nourished and made new. Amen

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So we pray because we can't help but pray. Our interrelatedness makes prayer possible. Our separation makes it necessary. And finally, our belief in God who is closer than breathing and nearer than hands and feet (as Tennyson put it) makes it happen!

CLOSING STORY

William Butler Yeats wrote a poem about an old Irish priest named Peter Gilligan. Gilligan was a faithful priest, a good priest, but he had a heavy burden to carry as the pastor of the parish. And besides, he was now getting on in years and would often come home at night tired out, exhausted, drained. One night he came home and received a call from a woman saying that her husband was dying and would he please come over and be with them. He complained to himself. He didn't want to go. But he was a priest. He had to go. So he knelt down beside his chair and he prayed to God to give him the strength to do his job, to bless him on this mission, this call of mercy.

And then - lo and behold - he fell asleep, only to awaken at dawn, upset and terrified that the man had already died. Ashamed at his own reliability, he got up and hurried as quickly as he could to that home. And when he arrived the man's wife met him with a smile and said, "Oh, Father....thank you for coming again; he died peacefully just after you left."

And Peter Gilligan realized that somehow, in the great mystery of God, the man and his wife actually believed that he had been there....and that God had made up for his shortcomings in a way he would never understand. And the poem closes with these lines:

"He who hath made the night of stars  
For souls who tire and bleed,  
Sent one of his great angels down  
To help me in my need.

He who is wrapped with planets  
In His care,  
Had pity on the least of things  
Asleep upon his chair."

It's my belief that praying for others does make a difference. In the great mystery of God, it always creates a new situation. And we should do it more than we do.

LET US PRAY

Our thoughts and prayers, O God, move out to include others - loved ones from whom we may be separated by distance, but not separated by prayer this morning. We pray, too, for those here at home who are hurting as well as those in distant places. Move in our hearts. And make our wills strong that we may respond to the needs of others in creative and meaningful ways that do make a difference.

On this world communion Sunday, help us to feel our oneness and our closeness to all your children through the world. May the bread and wine open our eyes to the presence of the living Christ among us. Bind us more closely to each other and to Him and lift up our hearts and minds to You, O God, that we may depart from here - renewed in body and soul, fed, nourished and made new. Amen