

PENTECOST 10
July 24, 2016
Genesis 18:20-32
Luke 11:1-13
"Praying for the World"
Pastor Saul Stensvaag

There are many, many ways to pray. Some are complex, and some are simple. The writer, Ann Lamott was once asked about her prayer life. She said, *"I basically have three prayers:*

One is, 'Help! Help! Help! Help!'

The second is 'Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!'

And the third is, 'Wow!'"

But today I'd like us to think about intercessory prayer: prayer on behalf of others. Because our Old Testament text is a fascinating example of how a person of faith can pray for others.

I love this picture of Abraham bargaining with God:

"Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty righteous are found there." God answered, "Fine! For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." Then Abraham said, "Well ... suppose ten are found there." God answered, "All right already, for the sake of ten I won't destroy it."

Here was a person willing to intercede for the needs of others. That's intercession – praying for others – and it's part of what we as Christians are called to do.

I was a champion intercessor when I was a kid. I had a long list of people to pray for, a list I somehow had memorized in my head, and I never forgot anyone.

My mom or dad would tuck me in at night, and we would pray,

"Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep; guard me Jesus through the night and wake me with the morning light." (We liked that version better than the scary one!)

Then I would begin the list of intercessions:

"God bless mommy and daddy; God bless Rebecca & Ruth & John Mark; God bless aunt Tena, God bless grandma & grandpa; God bless aunt Ingrid & uncle Ry, God bless uncle Ray & aunt Millie; and cousins Cathy & Buddy & Ingrid & Paul;"

Then, after some more cousins and friends names, *"God bless the hungry children in China and Africa, and ... God bless everybody! Amen."*

Children's prayers can often be very moving and sensitive. I wish you could see the way our children pray at the beginning of Children's Choir practice.

Many raise their hands to volunteer, and the prayers are almost always prayers for others. My favorite, which one little boy prayed almost every week, was, “*I pray for God.*” I’m pretty sure that brings a smile to God’s lips every time!

Last Spring I took a flight to San Francisco with my 3-year-old granddaughter, Hannah, to meet up with her parents. We had a wonderful adventure, and at one point, when we were killing time in an airport, we decided to say her prayers.

She prayed for mommy and daddy, and all the usual suspects, and then we said, Amen. But immediately, Hannah said, “*We forgot Ronak.*” Ronak is my other daughter’s boyfriend. So we had to add a P.S. to our prayer.

Later, as we were waited for almost an hour for the shuttle from our hotel to pick us up at the airport, she wanted to pray again. I muttered, maybe we should pray that the bus comes. Sure enough, Hannah prayed, “*God bless the bus.*”

As for me, I must admit that since those days of childhood, my zeal for intercession has tended to ebb and flow. And even after I became a pastor, I struggle with my prayer life just like any other Christian. There may be weeks that go by when it’s **all I can do to just go through the motions of prayer – my heart isn’t really in it.**

But when I find that my prayer life is weak, or non-existent, I **try not to beat myself up** over it. **I’m a sinner. I’m not perfect.**

And so I simply ask God’s forgiveness and begin again. And I find that God helps me make a fresh start. Perhaps the life of a Christian will always be one of stops and starts when it comes to prayer.

But I’d like to share a really positive lesson I’ve learned through intercessory prayer over the last several months. In that time I’ve been using a new devotional guide: a book by Thomas Merton entitled [A Book of Hours](#).

It contains prayers for every day of the week, four times a day. And twice a day: in the morning and at dusk, in between some of the readings, there’s the single word: “[Intercessions](#).”

Having intercessions as a set part of my devotions has forced me to pray intentionally for others twice a day.

I pray of course for the sick, including relatives battling cancer. I pray for members of our congregation who are facing struggles. I pray for families who are going through crisis, or young people who seem particularly at risk.

Some days my list is longer than others. It sort of depends on how much energy I have that day.

And I've made an interesting discovery: the discipline of **praying for others twice a day** has actually **brought about a change in me**.

When I am regularly praying for others, for some reason, the **faces of those I'm praying for come to mind many times throughout the day**.

And each time I think of one of the folks I'm praying for, it's an **opportunity to pray for them again**. So it has a **ripple effect**.

Oh, I know, it's **easy to become cynical about intercessory prayer**.

If you've ever prayed desperately that someone's life would be spared and it doesn't happen, there's a part of us that says, *"What's the use? God doesn't give us what we want anyway, so why bother?"*

But that doesn't change the fact that **we are told to pray for others**. Praying for the needs of others may or may not have an effect on God.

But praying intentionally for the needs of others definitely has an effect on the one doing the praying.

When I am in a regular rhythm of intercession, I am **freed up** from the **strong temptation to always dwell on my own needs, my own desires, my own problems**.

Intercessory prayer helps me to have more of a compassionate heart for all those who so desperately **need to feel the healing and comforting love of God**.

When I pray for someone who is **broken**, when I pray for someone who **feels lonely or inadequate**, when I pray for **a mom who is frazzled at the end of every day**, or **a marriage that's in trouble**, I feel **in tune with the heart of Jesus**, who was **deeply moved** whenever he saw someone who was hurting.

I don't know the stories of everyone in this room. But I know that **there's a lot of hurt in our community – in our country, and in the world**.

THERE IS MUCH SADNESS, FEAR, AND BROKEN-NESS.

And I'd like to **challenge you to join me as an intercessor** for those folks. Simply **pray that God would shower his grace and healing upon all those in need of it**. You don't need to go into details.

In fact, my childhood way of praying may be the most appropriate. If we simply pray, "*God bless so-and-so,*" we are admitting that **we don't always know what that person needs from God**, and we're saying that **we trust God to do what's best.**

But **be forewarned!** Praying for those who are suffering may mean **sharing some of their pain.** Your **heart may break a little** as you **lift their names up to God.** But **it's worth it.**

For those of you out there who never pray, I'll simply **invite you to give it a try.**

And I'd also like to add a selfish prayer request. If you aren't already doing so, **please pray for your pastors!** They will **feel supported in a wonderful way** just knowing they're being lifted up in prayer.

A pastor friend of mine had a resident of a nursing home praying for him every day.

But then the pastor went through several weeks of **struggle.** Finally **he went to visit his nursing home prayer partner.** "*Are you mad at me?*" he asked. "*Have you stopped praying for me?*"

"*Well, I didn't know if it really made a difference,*" she said. To which he replied, "**Let's leave that up to God. Meanwhile, please don't quit on me!**"

If you do pray for your pastors, it **just might change you.**

I've learned that **I'm a little slower to criticize someone** or speak ill of them when I'm **praying regularly for them!**

And who knows, God might open your ears to hear the sermons differently if you've been praying for the preacher during the week. Never underestimate the power of intercessory prayer to **change the one who's doing it!**

And let me **ask a special favor of all of you.** Please **pray for your next Senior Pastor.** Start praying now, even before you know who it will be.

Pray that God would **open your heart to welcome, love and respect your new pastor.** That could open the door to some wonderful mutual ministry together.

Friends, we worship **a God who wants to hear from us every day.**

We worship a **God who cares for the world**, and who **invites us to be a part of that caring by offering our prayers for all those in need.**

And we worship a **God who promises to always hear our prayers and work a wonderful transformation within our hearts as we pray.** Amen.