

## CHRIST IS PRAYING FOR US

“Please pray for me.”

I have heard that request, in so many words, countless times as a pastor. And I’ve been asked to pray for a wide variety of things, some of them a little less vital than others, for sure.

I’ve been asked by concerned brides to pray for good weather for their upcoming outdoor wedding. One time a teenager asked me to pray that she would pass her driver’s examination. A few years ago I visited a veterinary clinic at someone’s request and prayed for God to make their ailing dog well.

I’ve been asked to pray for broken marriages to be healed; for alcoholics to find sobriety; for dying people in a hospital or hospice bed to find peace; for lost souls to find Jesus; for people grieving the death of a loved one to receive assurance; and for tiny, stillborn babies who had never taken a single breath outside their mother’s womb to be received into God’s loving care.

It can be tremendously comforting to know that someone is praying for you. I’m honored to be able to provide such comfort as a minister; but even if the prayer doesn’t come from a minister it can still bring great consolation. Just knowing that others are keeping us in their prayers can lift our spirits and offer encouragement when we’re troubled and afraid.

This morning in John’s Gospel we heard a prayer Jesus offered to God for the sake of his disciples who are “still in the world.”

Have you ever considered that Jesus wasn’t just talking about the disciples who were with him at the time, some 2000 years ago? Have you ever considered that Jesus’ prayer was offered for us, as well: for us present day disciples who are carrying on Jesus’ work and ministry in 2017? In that sense, the prayer we heard Jesus speak this morning has echoed down through history, through the centuries, and God is still listening to and responding to that prayer, even today. And we are the recipients of that prayer.

Jesus may not be literally praying to God for us today—although, who knows, maybe he is—but Jesus is, in a sense, still praying for us through that prayer for his disciples that John’s Gospel recorded. In that prayer of our Lord, which took place in the upper room as he tried to ready his disciples for his impending death, Jesus made it clear that he wasn’t just praying for that handful of friends gathered around him at the table, but he was also praying for

everyone who would come to believe in him in the future, through all time and in every place.

So, what did Christ pray for on our behalf?

He began by praying for our eternal life.

At this point I should tell you that “eternal life” is a very misunderstood phrase. Many people tend to think that eternal life simply means a life that goes on and on forever; a life without end that doesn’t begin until our life here on earth ends. But eternal life isn’t just life that’s perpetual and never dies away. It’s life that is increased and expanded in every dimension.

This increased life Jesus prayed for us to receive consists, quite simply, in knowing God. Eternal life is knowing the only true God, and knowing the Christ who has come from God. So, receiving the Holy Spirit, learning the mind of God and living the life of Christ, that’s eternal life. That’s what Jesus prayed for and wants to see grow and increase in us. Eternal life is a personal, intimate relationship with the eternal God that begins now, in this life, but will continue on into the next life. That’s what Jesus asked God for us to have.

Jesus also prayed that our lives would give glory to Christ, and in giving glory to Christ, give glory to God. Jesus gave glory to God by doing the work that God willed for him to do. That meant teaching, healing, and helping others. And Jesus also glorified God by dying on the cross. In John’s Gospel, the crucifixion was Jesus’ hour of glory. But please know that it wasn’t the horrific death by crucifixion Jesus suffered that was glorious; rather, it was Jesus’ total obedience to God and faithfulness to his calling by God, which led to his death on the cross, that was glorious.

And Just as Jesus glorified God through obedience and faithfulness, he prayed that we would also glorify God that way by living as Jesus lived: sharing the good news of God’s grace in Christ, reaching out to others in love, and taking up our own crosses and following Jesus as he told his disciples to do.

I hope I’m not making the Christian faith sound grim, because really it’s not. In fact, once eternal life starts to take hold of us, we will discover that there’s nothing more joyful in life than living to please and glorify God, just as Jesus did. It’s in the moments when we deny ourselves and give ourselves over fully to the will of God that we’re actually our true ourselves, our best selves, our most authentic selves; the selves God intended us to be when God made us in the beginning.

So, Jesus prayed that we would know God and glorify God and do God’s will. And Jesus also prayed on our behalf that we would be watched over and protected in the name of God. But again we need to be careful how we interpret that prayer Jesus prayed. Jesus wasn’t asking God for unconditional

safety for his followers. What Jesus said was, “Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.”

In other words, Jesus prayed to God the Father to keep us safe from anything that might come between us and divide us, the Body of Christ, from one another. Jesus asked God to protect us from anything that might keep us from being in community and loving each another.

That part of Jesus’ prayer for us wasn’t about surviving car wrecks or being cured of cancer. It was about surviving as a Christian. His prayer was about being cured of jealousy and destructive anger. It was about being healed of hatred and hurtful words and bitterness. It was about preventing cold-heartedness and apathy toward our neighbors in need. Christ’s prayer asked God to keep us safe from anything that would hurt or undermine our ability to love and to forgive those who have injured us, fully and unconditionally, just as God has forgiven us.

It can be tremendously comforting to know that someone is praying for us. And knowing that Christ’s prayer for his disciples continues to resonate in God’s ear, and God is still responding to it and interceding for us in our times of need, can help us make it through the most difficult times in our lives. And, of course, to know that another person is praying for us, as well, one human being talking to and petitioning God on behalf of another human being and supplementing Jesus’ prayer, can also be tremendously reassuring.

Let me share a story with you, an experience a woman named Susan Morin had, to illustrate the power of people-to-people prayer that adds to Jesus’ prayer for us.

As I drove to work that March, some patches of snow were still on the ground. The winter of 1991 had been a hard one for me as a single working mother. My three children were in their teens, and I was finding it hard to cope with their changing emotional needs and our financial needs. Each month I struggled to provide the bare necessities.

I faithfully attended church and a Bible Study, but I had very little time for anything else. I longed to give back somehow. “Lord, what can I do for you? I feel like I’m always taking because my needs are so great.”

The answer to my question seemed so simple. Pray. Right then and there, I committed my drive time to prayer.

My request was simple: “Lord, please give me some people to pray for. I don’t even have to know their needs, just let me know who they are.” My spirits lifted and I continued to pray during the remainder of my 45-minute trip from New Hampshire to Vermont.

I arrived at work and proceeded to open the mail and prepare the deposit. I was in charge of accounts receivable for the Mary Meyer Corporation, a company that makes stuffed animals. I opened one envelope and attached to the check was a note that said, "I'm sorry this payment is late. I have been seriously ill. Thank you, Beverly Thompson.

I can't explain it, but instantly I knew that this was the person I was supposed to pray for. The assurance came in a feeling of peace and excitement combined. I knew God had answered my prayer from less than one hour ago. So began my journey of prayer for Beverly Thompson. At first, I found it very awkward to pray for someone I didn't even know. But I did know one thing besides her name. She owned Chapter One Bookstore in Presque Isle, Maine, and ordered bulk quantities of our plush animals to sell. But I didn't know how old she was. Was she married, widowed, single or divorced? Did she have any children? What kind of sickness did she have? Was she terminally ill?

The answers to those questions weren't revealed as I prayed for Beverly, but I did find out how much the Lord loved her and that she was not forgotten by Him. Many days I found myself in tears as I entered into prayer for her. I prayed that God would give her comfort for whatever it was she would have to endure. And I asked God to give her strength and courage for her to accept things that she might find hard to face.

One morning, as my wipers pushed the spring rain off my windshield, I saw muted tones of browns and grays. I prayed that the Lord would give Beverly eyes to see that the same drab landscape could be transformed into the greens and yellows of spring in a single day filled with sunshine. I prayed that she would find hope, even though it might seem covered up in the muted tones of her life, and that she could always rely on a God who can transform winter into spring.

In May, I felt moved to send her a card to let her know I was praying for her. As I made this decision, I knew I was taking a risk. Because I had taken her name from where I worked, I could possibly lose my job. I wasn't in a position to be without any income. "But God," I prayed, "I've grown to love Beverly Thompson. I know you'll take care of me no matter what happens."

In my first card, I told Beverly a little bit about myself and how I had asked the Lord for specific people to pray for. Then I mentioned how I had come to get her name. I also told her that the Lord knew all about what she was going through and wanted her to know how much he loved her.

Summer came and went, and I continued to send Beverly cards and notes. I never heard from her, but I never stopped praying for her, and I even told my Wednesday night Bible Study group the story. They prayed for her, too.

At times I had to confess to God that I really wanted a response. I wanted to know what Beverly thought about this stranger and her steady stream of notes and cards. Did she think I was completely crazy? Did she hope I would stop?

On a bitter January evening, the phone rang and my 15-year-old son, Tajin, hollered, “Mom, it’s for you! It’s someone named Bob Thompson.” The name didn’t register at first. My mind whirred, Thompson . . . Bob Thompson . . . like a computer searching for the right answer, until finally my brain made the connection. Beverly Thompson.

I took the phone from my son’s hand, and immediately my hand went clammy. “I know why he’s calling,” I thought. He’s calling to tell me to stop bothering his wife. They probably think I’m a religious kook.” A million scenarios went through my mind.

“Hello, Mr. Thompson,” my voice squeaked nervously.

“Is this Susan Morin? My daughter and I have just been going through my wife’s things and found your cards and notes, and your phone number. We wanted to call and let you know how much they meant to Beverly. When we found them they were well-worn from many readings and tied together with a red ribbon.” Then he said quietly, “My wife was diagnosed with lung cancer at the age of 48. She passed away a week ago.”

I winced, but Mr. Thompson’s next words comforted me. “She never suffered any pain at all. I know now this was a result of your prayers.” Then he answered one of the questions I had nagged God about. “The reason you never heard back from her was because she also developed brain cancer,” he said. “Our relationship with God amounted to going to church once in a while, and it was nothing that had much effect on our lives. But I wanted you to know that my wife asked to be baptized two weeks before she passed away. And the night before she died, she told me it was okay for her to die because she was going home to be with her Lord.”

As Bob Thompson continued to share his wife’s story with me, the drab landscape of my own life was transformed. As insignificant as my life had appeared to be to me, God used it to shine his love upon another life, resulting in a gift that no one could take away. The experience of praying for another person increased my faith tremendously. God took one of the lowest points in my life and added glints of His glory. It made me realize that when we’re willing to be obedient, God works in profound ways.

I believe Jesus was praying for Susan Morin through the prayer he uttered on behalf of his disciples so long ago. I think that prayer, which God still listens to even today, moved God’s Spirit to guide her when she decided to pray for

another person, a total stranger. Through Jesus' ancient prayer for his followers, he prayed, "Father, give Susan the words she needs as she prays for Beverly; and let Beverly know with certainty that Susan came from you, and you sent her."

My dear friends, life can be very hard and challenging, filled with pain and sorrow. So praise God that, we're being prayed for even now through Jesus' prayer. Through that prayer, he is always praying for us.

In this shallow world, Christ prays that we might have deep life, abundant life, eternal life.

In this selfish world, Christ prays that we might lose ourselves in loving service to others so we might find our true selves, to the glory of God.

And in this broken world, Christ prays for our healing and wholeness and oneness as a Christian community.

Yes, in a sense, Christ is praying for you and me today, right now, through a prayer he spoke on behalf of all his disciples that was intended for all time. And that means, even when we don't deserve it, Christ praying for us. When nobody else seems to care what we're going through, and at those times when we can't even bring ourselves to pray, Christ is praying for us. When we feel completely forgotten, our name is still on the lips of the Lord.

Thanks be to God that we can hear that prayer and be reassured by it whenever we want, when we read the Scriptures. Amen.