SHAMELESS AUDACITY

How to Pray for Others

Texts: Mark 2:1-12; Luke 11:5-8

I want to talk with you today about daring to pray for others – about the ministry known as "intercessory prayer." Webster's Dictionary defines "intercession" as the act of going between two parties on behalf of one of them. An Intercessor is someone who brings the needs of another person before someone who has the capacity to help with those needs. That's the ministry Jesus talks about in a parable he tells in Luke 11. A traveler arrives at a man's home, hungry from a long journey. The host doesn't have enough bread to feed him, but remembers that just next door lives a resourceful neighbor. So the man goes and knocks on the neighbor's door. Sadly, he hears a shout from inside the house: "Go away, we're already in bed!"

Now he's got a problem. Is he going to go away and risk alienating his hungry houseguest or is he going to keep knocking and risk alienating his next door neighbor? The man decides to prioritize his houseguest. So he keeps pounding at the door, trying to intercede on behalf of his hunger. And Jesus finishes the story: **I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your <u>shameless audacity</u> he will surely get up and give you as much as you need"** (Luke 11:8). In other words, even though the neighbor doesn't regard the intercessor as a friend worthy of making an effort for, he will get up and answer the door, simply because of the intercessor's persistence.

Hold on to that idea, because I'm going to return to it later. Let me turn your attention now to a somewhat similar story found in Mark chapter 2, only this isn't a parable; it's something that might have made the evening news. The scripture reads: **A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and [Jesus] preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."** (Mark 2:1-12)

The text says that when some of the local religious authorities heard these words they accused Jesus of blasphemy. They said, **"Who can forgive sins but God alone?"** But Jesus replied: **I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and**

they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Now, I invite you to think with me about these two stories of faith and what they have to teach us about how we are meant to intercede for the sake of others in prayer. To get at this teaching, I want to pose some questions that I hope you'll answer quite personally; and the first one is this: In your circle of acquaintance or concern **"Who is on the mat?"** Who in your life is something like that paralyzed man from Capernaum -- down on the ground, stuck in a situation, crippled by some condition?

Maybe it's someone you know with a serious SPIRITUAL problem. They don't know or love God or care about his kingdom. They're lost in themselves. They are missing the most resourceful relationship available in this life and at risk of eternal separation from God in the next. Or perhaps you know somebody who suffers from some degree of EMOTIONAL paralysis. They just can't seem to get past their wounds or their anger, their guilt or their worry, their anger or their grief. They are trying to move on, maybe valiantly, but they're stuck on that mat. Or maybe the person on your mind today has a difficult RELATIONAL problem with a member of their family, a workmate, a teacher, schoolmate, or friend. Perhaps the crippling factor is FINANCIAL hardship. Maybe it's a PHYSICAL problem – an addiction or illness from which they can't seem to get up. What's the name and need of the individual, the institution, even the nation that comes to your mind like a hungry houseguest in the middle of the night? What's that name?

Chances are, if THEY knew how to get unstuck from their situation, they would have done it already. If YOU had the power in yourself to fix that person's condition, you would have done it. That name you've named is like that hungry man in Jesus' parable. They're like that paralytic in Capernaum. They need the help of a Neighbor with vastly more resources than either of you have. But they can't or won't go there by themselves. What that person you've named desperately needs is for someone to take them to Jesus. So here's a second question: **"Will you be their intercessor?"**

Don't answer that question too blithely or too quickly. Sometimes we throw around the phrase: "I'll pray for you," as if it were nothing much -- as if all that was required was for us to wave at heaven and point to the person in need. But truly interceding for others in prayer is a more muscular endeavor. It's a heavy commitment. It's like lifting a paralytic. It means that we are willing to feel the deep weight of somebody's concerns – to really think about what it would be like to be in their condition, and to really let it soak into our heart and mind, so that their burden becomes our burden -- and then to carry that with us.

Will you accept the weight of being an intercessor for that individual or institution you've named who is now on the mat? This is a significant commitment you're making. But also remember this: Every time you answer YES

to that question you become a little bit more like the Supreme Intercessor -- the One who bore the full weight of the entire world. For **Christ Jesus who died —more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also <u>interceding</u> for us"** (Rom 8:34).

Sometimes, the weight of people's problems is so great that it's too much for one intercessor to carry alone. I've always loved the image we get in Mark chapter 2 of the four men who picked up the corners of the paralytic's mat and together carried him to Jesus. Again and again the Bible commends the value of corporate or shared prayers of intercession. When people come together to pray for someone it not only forms a cord of community and encouragement among them; it unleashes an even greater potential for God to work. So here's a third question for you: **"<u>Who could take hold of the mat with you?</u>"** as you intercede in prayer for that person or place where the life-changing love of Jesus is deeply needed right now?

In his wonderful book, LOVE TO PRAY, Alvin VanderGriend observes: "God seeks intercessors not because he lacks the wisdom or power to govern the world without them but because he, in his sovereign good pleasure, has chosen to govern the world through the prayers of his people." In other words, corporate intercession is one of the most important ministries we have as children of the King of this Universe. It is one of the ways we exercise the <u>dominion</u> over creation that God gave us at the foundation of the world. Vandergriend says: "Things will happen when we pray that wouldn't have happened if we hadn't prayed. And things will not happen if we do not pray that would have happened if we did." Or as E.M. Bounds remarked: "Prayer can do anything God can do." It can reach any place that God can reach.

I was in the ICU with Christ Church's HR Director, Larry Lutey, a few weeks ago. A ravaging e coli infection had sent his body into septic shock. Larry's temperature had spiked to 107 degrees. His kidneys and liver had shut down. His heart had stopped. A team of doctors and nurses were working heroically to save his life, but one confided that there was only about a 5% chance Larry would live. A small circle of his family and friends gathered with me in the waiting room and we prayed together for a miracle of preservation and healing. In other rooms that day and in the days ahead, members of our staff took hold of Larry's mat too, and together we carried him toward Jesus.

It's a miracle, the doctor said, because Larry survived that crisis. Today, his heart is working on its own. He's breathing on his own. His bodily systems are coming back online. He's able to talk and to stand up for short periods of time. But his stretcher-bearers are still praying, because we want Larry all the way back. Multiple times since then we've been gathering to intercede for Larry and his family. We are like those four men who carried their friend all the way across town. We are like those guys who saw the way to Jesus blocked by the crowd but would not be deterred. We are like those friends who, with backs

screaming, hauled their loved one up a flight of stairs and onto the roof and then clawed at the roof materials until they made a hole through which they could lower the mat to the feet of Jesus. We are interceding for Larry with shameless audacity.

How much passion and perseverance do YOU have for the person on your mat? **"What steps will you take to carry someone in prayer to the feet of Jesus?"** Could you commit 30 minutes today to interceding for him or her? Could you give it 5 to 15 minutes every day until you see a result? Could you set an alarm on your phone or watch and pray multiple times each day? Could you call a prayer meeting in your home or come to one of the ones that meet regularly here at the church building? The Bible teaches that there is something about persevering prayer that God especially honors.

You know, it strikes me that there must have been a difficult moment for those four men on the roof. They'd gone all this distance for him. But when they lowered him through that dark hole in the roof, they had to let go. Sometimes, that's what our prayers of intercession feel like, don't they? It's like depositing something of our heart in a black hole. As our staff has prayed for our friend Larry in recent weeks, it has been hard at times, because we honestly don't know how God will answer our prayers for his welfare. And this is the final question I want to pose to you as you exercise the ministry of intercession? **"Can you trust Jesus to do what is most needed?"**

In the movie, RAY, there is a poignant scene when a seven-year-old African American boy named Ray -- newly blinded by glaucoma -- trips and falls hard on his face as he enters his family's tiny house. Overcome by defeat and despair, Ray cries out for his mother repeatedly. When there is no response, his cries grow more plaintive. Only the audience sees that his mama is actually standing there just a few feet away. Tears stream down her face as she makes the choice not to answer her child in the way he wants, but in the way he needs. And then, Ray's cries begin to subside and he pulls himself together. Tuning in on the power of his hearing, he orients himself, and rises to his feet. Unlocked from his paralysis, he begins the journey of courage and creativity that will make Ray Charles one of the greatest and most beloved artists of all time.

It is fascinating to me that those four men brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus for the healing of his body, but what Jesus first did was to heal his soul. We pray a lot for physical healing. I would say, as a pastor, that curing people of their physical mortality is the number one prayer of intercession I hear offered. But the breakdown of our bodies and the coming of Death is the one great certitude everyone faces. The crucial variable is what kind of soul will someone bring to life's challenges? What kind of soul will they bring when they meet with Jesus beyond that black hole? It's good to pray for healing. God will honor that now or he'll wait till the final restoration to come. But we should

also dare to trust Jesus to do what is most needed.

After all, the One on whose door we knock at night – the One whose roof we seek to tear open with our prayers – is not an uncaring neighbor, like the one in the parable. Jesus is your Friend. He is the One who has poured out his life's blood, who weeps hot tears of compassion, for you and me and the people for whom we pray. So maybe our greatest intercession for those WE love ought to be: **"Forgive their sins, Lord. Draw them close to you, Christ. Have your own way, Jesus. Have YOUR best way."**
Let us pray…

Lord, bring to our minds someone who is truly on the mat right now. Give us the courage to ask others to truly share with us the weight of that person's burden. Help us to be faithful in carrying that person's concerns to you, step-by-step, past the roadblocks, onto the roof. Encourage our spirits to dig down with shameless audacity, daring to ask what we believe is best, but trusting your great love and your long view of history for what is needed most. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU PRAY FOR OTHERS:
Who's on the mat?
Are you willing to bear the weight of being their intercessor?
Who could take hold of the mat with you?
What steps will you take to carry someone in prayer?
What do you want to ask Jesus to do for them?
Can you trust Jesus to do what is needed most?

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Alvin VanderGriend, Love to Pray, p.48.