



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Two Scars and a Thousand Prayers
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, October 11, 2020
The Rev. Paul McLain

'But Moses implored the Lord his God.'

One of my earliest childhood memories is hearing my parents tell me the story of how I almost died at age three. I had contracted a severe staph infection and was in the hospital for several days. Mom and Dad told me how that during each of those days, the people of Monticello Baptist Church prayed fervently for me. They told me about the many phone calls, cards, notes, flowers, meals, and everything else they received from church members. But what struck me as a child were all those prayers - I could hear in my mind a thousand prayers - being lifted up to God for me.

And, in my mind, I linked those thousand prayers to God somehow intervening and changing the direction and outcome of what happened to me. According to what my parents told me, all indications were that I was supposed to die. Yet somehow, I lived.

In our Old Testament lesson from Exodus, things were also moving in one direction toward death. While Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments from God, the Hebrew people down below were already making a mockery of them. They were tired of waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain and wondered if he had abandoned them.

They pleaded with Aaron to make gods for them, and Aaron placated them by molding a golden calf. They worshiped before it and danced around it, and God saw all this and was absolutely furious! He had not yet sent Moses down with the Ten Commandments and his chosen people had already completely violated and desecrated the first two of them! God told Moses that he was going to destroy them all, and start over once again just like he did with the Great Flood. Moses would become the new Noah, albeit without an ark. Now, this offer may have been tempting to Moses. When God referred to the people as stiff-necked, I can picture Moses smirking and saying under his breath, 'Yeah, and you ought to try living with them 24/7.'

Moses had heard their endless complaints, but he still believed in their promise. And he pleaded to God on their behalf. Moses reminded God of his promise to the people. And God did something extraordinary and very un-Godlike. God changed God's mind. This was not a sign of weakness, but was a refreshing act of humility. This conversation between Moses and God is one of the first recorded intercessory prayers. Intercessory prayer is what we do when we pray for ourself or for others.

What is interesting about the earliest intercessory prayers is how raw and personal they are. Abraham actually bargained with God. When God planned to destroy Sodom, he said what if we could find 50 righteous people there? God said well, OK, if we can find 50. Then Abraham said, 'How about 45? 40? 30? 20? How about 10?' Each time, God said OK. And later, the entire hymnbook of Psalms is a constant song of intercessory prayer with the refrain: God, if you will just help me and save me from the wild beast on the other side of the hill, the enemy army that is headed my way, or the deepest, darkest iniquity that lies within myself.

At last we come to Jesus, our great high priest, who intercedes for us without ceasing. In the Gospel of John, he prays this prayer for us, his friends, 'Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.'

So, what is happening in intercessory prayer? The harder question is: Why does the outcome sometimes change in a positive way as it did for me at age three, but sometimes it doesn't? Perhaps, intercessory prayer is not all about outcomes.

The Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner wrote, 'Who understands intercessory prayer? Only one who prays. If you want to understand it: Pray, beg, weep. Beg for the necessities of the body so that your petition for the earthly gift transforms *you* more and more into a heavenly being. Beg so that you make yourself into an offering from above during the petition for the gift from above. Beg so that your continuing prayer of petition appears to be a pledge of your faith in the light of God in the darkness of the world, for your hope for life in this constant dying, for your loyalty of love that loves without reward.'

Intercessory prayer changes us as much as it does the person or persons for whom we are praying. As we lift up each name before God, we are somehow lifted up to God as well. We carry the messiness and the murkiness of our own lives, and our hope for ourselves and others in the midst of that messiness and murkiness into the life and light of God. And God listens. And God cares. And God acts. And often, God weeps.

Over the last six months, Calvary has become a place and a space for prayer perhaps more than any other time in our 188-year history. Since March 15th, we have offered over 366 services including Sunday Morning Prayer, Early Morning Prayer, Morning Prayer, Wednesday Noonday Prayer, Evensong, Compline, and the Outdoor Eucharist.

One of the most moving parts of our online services is when you type in the names of those persons, pets, or situations that you wish to lift up to God that day. Think of how many thousand prayers have been lifted to God. And, as we've become a more deeply praying church, our outreach and action in the community have seemed more like prayers too.

I am blessed with a visible reminder of the relationship between prayer, action, and love. My mom told me that when I was in the hospital, the medical team made two incisions in my abdomen. She told me that my dad volunteered to help run a tape through the incisions that pulled out some of the infected tissue. I still hold on to that image of my father sitting over me, meticulously running a tape through

those two tiny incisions. I can see each motion of his as offering a little prayer for his son. I can hear a song in his heart, much like the song of Jean Valjean in the musical, *Les Misérables*:

'God on high hear my prayer. In my need you have always been there. He is young. He's afraid. Let him rest. Heaven blessed. Bring him home. Bring him home. Bring him home.'

I still have two little parallel scars on my right side. When I touch them, they remind me of one father praying to another father, 'Bring him home.' And those thousand prayers of church members back then, along with our thousands of prayers today, lift us up to the hope that God will bring us all home. *Amen.*