

Text: Matthew 19:13-15

March 16, 2008

Theme: Intercessory prayer—unselfconscious and simple—is the way of love in God’s Kingdom.

Title: *Help Them*

Before we go any farther, I would like to ask if you would do something with me. I’d like to invite you to think of some people you care about, people who are important to you, people you love. They may be sitting beside you or near you. They may be thousands of miles from here.

These could be people in your family or where you work or go to school.

They could be people who are facing difficulty of some kind right now.

But get them into your mind. Are they there?

And now, if you will, I’d like to ask you to get their names down on paper. There are some lines at the top of your sermon notes for jotting down names of people you care about. Feel free to add more names if there aren’t enough lines there for you. Go ahead and write down their names. (pause)

What we’re talking about today is how we love these people, how we help the people we care about, how we love best those who matter most to us. Because if we really care about people, it isn’t long before we reach a point beyond where our care can go.

When we love people, eventually we desire more for them, far more than is within our power to give them. And that will lead us to prayer.

Praying for people is the way of love. We call this intercessory prayer—becoming available to God for the well-being of others—and it may be the most loving thing any person could ever do.

It is also by definition one of the most unselfish things we do. Praying for other people shifts the center of gravity in life away from our own needs and concerns: love at its best, love in its purest form.

I can’t think of anything more needed, more crucial than praying for others. People simply need more than what we can give them: more than what classes and music and activities and sermons can accomplish. Intercessory prayer is the lifeline of the Kingdom of God. It’s how God works in the world.

I may fall short as a husband and dad. But I know the best thing my family and yours could receive from any of us is ultimately the most important thing: they can at least count on having someone praying for them.

This is one of the things we most miss in the loss of Karen’s parents. Karen’s mother, Gloria, was deeply dedicated to intercessory prayer. She had lists typed up for every day of the week, seven columns on a page, that she kept with her all the time, wherever she was. And at the top of each day’s column were us and our children, Karen’s brother’s family, every day.

Intercessory prayer fulfills the Bible’s description of who we are as the people of God: a priesthood, I Peter 2 says (2:5 and 9), the priesthood of all believers. Jewish tradition viewed priests as people who had the honor of going before the Most High God on behalf of others, bringing people to God in prayer.

That’s who we are.

And what action could have more love in it that to bring someone to Jesus?
And yet, because of pride, or doubt, because of our instinct to fix things ourselves, or because of our fear of what people will think, we pull back a bit from prayer. Maybe these parents hesitated in bringing their kids to Jesus. Maybe they weren't fixed up nicely. Maybe they were strong-willed or prone to cry with strangers, some sick or mentally handicapped. Maybe these families were poor or felt insecure in some way.

There could have been reluctance in the centurion who approached Jesus on behalf of a household servant he cared for. There were probably nervous feelings in the stomachs of the four men who carried their quadriplegic friend on his cot to an overcrowded house where they lowered him down to Jesus through the roof. There was likely a good bit of anxiety in Jairus who sought out Jesus' help for his sick daughter. There had to have been a feeling of vulnerability as Paul realized just how much he depended on others to "help us by your prayers" in his missionary work, words he wrote to the Corinthians. (II Corinthians 1:10-11)

But in them all, like in the parents of these children, love overruled, love that wanted more than what was within their power to give, love that simply wanted to bring those they cared about to Jesus "for him to place his hands on [these children] and pray for them." (Matthew 19:13)

Which is what we do every time we pray for people: we bring them to the One who "always lives to intercede," Hebrews 7:25 says—"Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us,"—Romans 8:34.

But what these parents saw as loving, the disciples of Jesus saw as hassle. It was inconvenient for them, frustrating: a fairly accurate description of prayer at times.

One pastor's six-year-old daughter had been so bad during the week that her mother decided to give her the worst kind of punishment: she couldn't go to the Easter egg hunt that following Saturday.

When the day came, her mother felt she had been too harsh and changed her mind. When she told the little girl, she could go to the egg hunt after all, the child's reaction was gloom and unhappiness.

"What's the matter? I thought you'd be thrilled to go to the Easter egg hunt!" her mom said.

"It's too late!" the little girl said. "I've already prayed for rain."

The children were an irritation to the disciples, who "rebuked" their parents. (Matthew 19:13) They didn't want Jesus to be interrupted in the middle of expounding on the hot topic of marriage and divorce as he was just before this in Matthew 19.

But bringing people to Jesus is not tidy and predictable. Intercessory prayer will mess with you. Not everyone we pray for is a child who can be more easily influenced than adults. Intercessory prayer enters into the realm of that strange mix of divine power and human will.

God will not force His will on people, no matter how hard we pray. So the results of our prayers can seem uneven and slow.

And sometimes we can get in the way, like how these disciples blocked the kids from Jesus. We can get in the way of God's answering our prayer for people in at least these four ways described in the Bible.

First, unconfessed sin. "Your sins are the roadblock between you and God," Isaiah 59:2 says. "That's why he doesn't answer your prayers or let you see his face." [CEV]

Second, selfishness can block God's answers to prayer. "Your requests are not granted because you pray from wrong motives," James 4:3 [NEB] says, "to spend what you get on your pleasures."

Third, uncaring attitudes in us block prayer. Proverbs 21:13 [CEV] says, "If you won't help the poor, don't expect to be heard when you cry out for help."

And fourth, inadequate faith can cause unanswered prayer. When you ask God for something, James 1 teaches, "be sure that you really expect him to answer, for a doubtful mind is as unsettled as a wave of the sea... People like that should not expect to receive anything from the Lord." (James 1:6-7 [NLT])

But even if we get all this right, God sometimes still seems unresponsive when we pray for people. And often that's because we discover more of Him than, more of His sufficiency, that God in Himself is enough.

We've said before that unanswered prayer reminds us that God is not a vending machine: put in a prayer, get out a blessing. We don't pay much attention to vending machines. "Look at how nice this vending machine looks. Look at what great things it does." No, all we care about is the results.

If every prayer were immediately answered as we wanted, we'd never think about God.

Unanswered prayer focuses our attention on Him. "When He stops giving us things," Oswald Chambers has written, "He brings us into the place where we can begin to understand Him."

Paul recognized this in what he referred to as his "thorn in the flesh," a physical problem he prayed and prayed about, all those prayers remaining unanswered. "Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away," he wrote the Corinthians.

"Each time [Jesus] said, 'My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness.'" (II Corinthians 12:7-9 [NLT])

Prayer is not tidy and predictable so that we come to know God as enough in Himself, even without His answers—that when we don't have them, we always have Him.

After Christmas, Karen and I and the kids got away for a few days together.

When we arrived at the hotel and got checked in, I took a shower. And this was the dialogue through the shower curtain in those few moments. I jotted it down later.

John Paul: "I can't find my map, Dad." "There are more down at the front desk, Son." "OK, Dad."

Mary Esther: "I just went pee-pee by myself, Daddy." "Good girl, Mary Esther." "Thanks, Daddy."

Luke: "I'm dressed, Dad." "Great job, Luke."

John Paul: "I put my Crocs behind my tennis shoes in the closet, Dad." "That'll work, JPT."

I finished up thinking about how that must be a little of what our prayers are like to God: big stuff to us; tiny chatter in proportion to His power and love for us.

And yet, that's the heart of prayer Jesus invites us to have: unselfconscious and simple.

This is prayer in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matthew 19:14-15)

Children in ancient society were there to be seen and not heard. Michael Green has written, "They had no rights, no status. They did not matter very much until they grew up." So for the disciples to shoo away these parents and their kids was typical. For Jesus to take an interest in their chatter was revolutionary.

But He just cares that much. Our concern for the people we love matters that much to the Lord, so we can bring it to Him, unselfconscious and simple.

Those words are a good description of the attitude we have around our altar: simply a meeting place with Jesus where it doesn't have to be dramatic or irregular to come and pray. It's OK to bring small things to God who knows the number of hairs on our heads. (Matthew 10:30)

The Bible encourages us to cast all our concerns for the people we love on Him—all of them, big or small—because He cares for us. (1 Peter 5:7)

So now, back to your prayer list.

I remember hearing my Grandpa Thomas talk about his prayer list, four men around their farming community in Barren County that he prayed for. He prayed for them, for years, that they would open their hearts to Jesus Christ.

Grandpa once showed me the hay bale in the loft of his barn where he prayed every morning.

Before he died, three of them became Christians. I was there when one of them responded to an invitation my Dad gave at the close of a revival meeting.

Got any tough cases on your list? Anyone here today who'll say, "I'll keep praying." Jesus focused some of His parables on having determination in intercessory prayer, showing His disciples that "they should always pray and never give up," Luke 18:1 says.

Prayer, Jesus teaches, is a little like a helpless widow who refuses to accept her helplessness, and her persistence brings the breakthrough. (Luke 18:1-8)

Intercessory prayer is like leaning on a neighbor for help with food for a stranger, even though to do so is terribly inconvenient. (Luke 11:5-13)

The Reformer John Calvin wrote, "We must repeat the same supplications not twice or three times only, but as often as we have need, a hundred and a thousand times... We must never be weary in waiting for God's help."

The book of Leviticus in the Old Testament describes how that the fire on the altar was to be kept burning perpetually. It was never to go out. And that's like our prayers for the people we care about.

And speaking of your list, is there anyone you would want to add?

The great preacher George Buttrick used to recommend that people begin their intercessions with prayers for our enemies. "Bless him or her, whom I think of as against me. Bless so-and-so, whom I have done wrong. Keep them in your love. Take away my bitterness."

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you..."

(Matthew 5:43-44)

Who else would you add to your list? The Bible tells us to pray for leaders. We pray for missionaries, for our church. What do we need to do to make sure our intercessory prayer moves out beyond our small concerns into a broken and needy world?

You could think of your prayers as being like these palm branches, laid down, making a way for the approach of Jesus to the one you pray for. Would you lay your prayers down for Him to come?

How would Jesus pray for the one you care about? This is what He is doing today: He is at the Father's side on your behalf in intercession. How could your prayers come into alignment with His?

As we come into Holy Week, who here will say: "I will become a man of endurance in prayer. I will become a woman of spiritual tenacity."

God's story has been written out of the determination of men and women who were at the end of their rope in prayer and decided to tie a knot and keep praying, even if those prayers always remain unanswered.

"All these faithful ones died without receiving what God had promised them," Hebrews 11:13 [NLT] says, "but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed the promises of God."

I believe the prayers of the faithful that remain unanswered on earth will receive spectacular vindication in heaven.

Who here would say, "I want that to be me, Lord. I'll keep praying."

Sources:

Foster, Richard J., *Prayer*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992.

Thomas, David R., *Praying for People You Love* (July 6, 2003) and *Unanswered Prayer* (March 20, 2005).