

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on August 22, 2021.

## **THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

***First of all, then I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people. I Timothy 2:1***

A visitor to the Capitol Building in Washington was accompanied by his small son. The little boy watched from the gallery when the Senate came to order.

"Why did the minister pray for all those men and women Dad?"

The father replied, "He didn't. He looked them over and prayed for the country."

Today as this humorous story suggests, we continue our series on the meaning of worship by turning to the purpose of the prayers of the people

When I was a child the part of the service that I most disliked was the pastoral prayer. I grew up before the liturgical renewal movement gave a larger role to the congregation. In my school days the congregation sang three hymns and sometimes joined in the prayer of confession. Almost the entire service was centered in the chancel. There were two very long parts of the service. Of course, the sermon was the longest. But during the sermon you did not have to sit completely still. My parents allowed me to write or draw on the bulletin. Sometimes there was an interesting story that caught my attention in the sermon. For me it was not too hard to get through this part of the service.

It was different with the pastoral prayer. I had to bow my head, close my eyes and be still for what seemed to be an eternity. I dreaded this part of the service. I think there were two reasons that I did not like the pastoral prayer.

One reason was that there was no opportunity for the congregation to participate. Every word was spoken from the chancel. There were no other voices offering petitions. There were no spoken responses. There were no musical responses. It was all one voice droning on.

A second reason that I disliked the pastoral prayer, as I got older, was that it often felt like a second sermon. The words of the prayer often seemed to be directed more at the congregation than to God. The concerns raised were sometimes phrased in such a way that one felt like the leader of worship was telling you what to think about some important issue of the day.

So, what is the purpose of the prayers of the people. The Book of Common Worship tells us:

**In response to the word, we pray for the world God so loves joining Christ's own ministry of intercession and the sighs of the Spirit, too deep for words. These prayers are not the work of a single leader, but an act of the whole congregation as Christ's royal priesthood. We affirm our participation in the prayer through our "amen" and other responses.**

In the New Testament we are taught a very simple lesson. You and I are told to pray for others. Our Book of Common worship tells who should be in our prayers. We read:

**Prayers of intercession and supplication are offered for the mission and ministry of the universal Church and the local congregation; care for the creation and the right use of resources; peace and justice in the world; the leaders and people of all nations; the poor, hungry and oppressed; compassion and reconciliation in the local community; healing and wholeness for all who suffer; and other special needs.**

The idea that we need to pray for others can seem strange. If you think about it for a few moments, you may wonder, why do we need to remind God of that which he already knows. God knows better than us what each person needs, why should we remind him. It conjures up an image of God as a forgetful old geezer who needs to be reminded now and then of what is needed. Our prayers of intercession can at times seem like nagging to get God's attention.

We can wonder what is the purpose of praying for others. Yet we are commanded to pray for others. Indeed, it is natural for us to want to pray for others.

The first reason that we should pray for others is that it demonstrates our love for them. It is natural for us to pray for those whom we love. We want to pray for our spouses, parents and children. Natural disasters often lead us to pray for the victims. We do so out of a sense of love.

Yet Jesus also tells us **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.** Jesus connects loving others to praying for them. It is often through praying for others that we begin to love them. One of the great saints of the Middle Ages was Angela of Foligno. When she first started to pray, she was very self-centered. She hated her mother, her husband and her children. She wanted them to die and she prayed for it. But the more she prayed, the more she was changed. Her hostilities began to be removed and her fellowship with her family improved. She came to desire good even for her worst enemies.

When we pray for others, we are demonstrating our love for them. It takes an act of will, but we can pray for those whom we despise. It is hard to believe this week, but we need to pray for the Taliban. When we pray for others even those whom we do not like, our hearts are softened, and we come to love them. Prayer shapes our perceptions and feelings.

You and I are told by Paul **First of all then I urge that supplications, prayers, intercession and thanksgivings be made for all people.**

Prayers of intercessions are acts of love for others.

A true prayer of intercession is also an act of commitment. When we pray for others it is in effect asking God to use us to help others.

It is always amazing to me how few people vote in our elections. In most Presidential years only 50% to 60% turn out. In most other elections less than half of the people go to the polls. Yet many of the same people, who stay home, will complain about our elected officials and the policies. I believe that people who complain but do not vote cannot be taken seriously. It is not enough to merely express an opinion. Each person needs to participate in the process. If you do not participate, do not complain.

It is the same with prayer. If you are not willing do to what you can for others, do not pray for them. When you pray for others you are asking God to use you to help that person. St. Francis prayed, "Make me an instrument of your peace." When we pray for others, we are asking God to use us as his instrument. A prayer of intercession is a serious offering of ourselves in service to others.

Thirdly when we pray for others, we ask God to give others what they need in order to complete the plan that God has for them. I think that sometimes our idea of praying for others means that we want God to give others all the goodies the world has to offer. Prayers of intercession are not merely to be a shopping list on behalf of others. It does not mean we are to pray that they would experience what they happen to desire. We are to pray for what is good for them.

You and I are to pray in love for others. This means we are to ask God to be present in the lives of others in ways which will help them grow in love, faithfulness and character. We are to pray that our families, friends and enemies would have those things they need to become the men, women and children God intends for them to be.

Lastly, we pray for others because it works. In some way that we cannot fully understand prayer makes a difference.

Dr. Randolph Byrd of the University of California has done some interesting experiments. Using tight controls and a group of 400 coronary-care patients at San Francisco General Hospital, he randomly divided them into two groups. One group of 192 patients was prayed for regularly by home prayer groups and the other 201 were not. In every other way they were treated normally by the hospital staff. Best-selling author Dr. Larry Dossey, in ***Recovering the Soul: A Scientific and Spiritual Search***, described Byrd's methods as the most rigid that can be used in clinical studies in medicine: "a randomized, double-blind experiment in which neither the patients, nurses, nor doctors knew which group the patients were in."

Byrd recruited Protestants and Catholics across the United States to pray for the first group. They were given their names with little information about their condition and were asked to pray daily. Each patient in the prayed-for group was on a list of five to seven of the volunteers to be prayed for.

The results of the 10-month study were remarkable. Those prayed for differed from the others in several striking ways: they were five times less likely to need antibiotics; they were three times less likely to develop pulmonary edema; none of them needed intubation (12 in the non-prayed for group had to have ventilatory support), and fewer of them died during the study.

Dossey comments: "If the technique had been a new drug or procedure it would have been heralded as some kind of break-through." One otherwise skeptical doctor impressed by Bryd's methods and the results has commented: "Maybe we doctors should be writing on our order sheets, Pray three times a day. If it works, it works."

This is not to say that prayer is a form of magic, where if you say the proper formula out will pop the desired result. We have all prayed at times for certain things, results and conditions and the answers have been a resounding no or worse still a deafening silence.

Yet prayer does release a power which we cannot understand or control. It releases energies that we cannot see or master. Prayer for others creates the power of love. God uses that power for his ends.

You and I are called by God to pray for others. A central part of worship is to include the prayers of the people. As we move forward, we need to find creative ways for all of us to participate in this part of the service. One voice does not work. The whole people of God gathered in this place must find ways to participate in lifting the concerns of the world to God. We will experiment with litanies and responses to increase the participation of all present. I do not want the prayers of the people to be the part of the service children and adults want to just get through, but rather a meaningful act of contact with God. Remember in the words of Richard Halverson, Presbyterian minister who was chaplain of the Senate:

**"Intercession is the truly universal work for the Christian. No place is closed to intercessory prayer: no continent, no nation, no city, no organization, no office. No power on earth can keep intercession out."**