

In the Palm of God's Hand
Isaiah 40:28-31, John 17:6-19
March 22, 2009

Years ago an American minister visited Charles Spurgeon's church in London. When the visitor noted that there was little heat in the sanctuary, he asked Spurgeon if he had a heating plant. Spurgeon led his guest to a large basement room. He explained that before every service, 400 members met there to pray for their pastor and the salvation of the lost. Spurgeon concluded, "This is the church's real heating plant."

The anecdote suggests a vital truth: Prayer is the real source of warmth in the community of faith. Prayer is our partnership with God in bringing into being a world marked by the character of God. Prayer connects us to God and to one another. It is like the energy when two flint stones are rubbed together to produce fire. Prayer brings together the power of God with the needs of the people, igniting the relationship with warmth, heat, even fiery passion.

Prayer was the source of Jesus' warmth during the long nights he spent in communion with God. This morning we have heard from John's gospel a prayer offered by Jesus on the night before his death. It is spoken among his disciples in the Upper Room after he has washed the feet of the disciples and given his final instructions to his followers. Jesus concludes his ministry with prayer.

Jesus begins with prayer for himself, but quickly moves on to prayer for his disciples. It is a prayer of intercession for those whom he has mentored for three years. His prayer requests their protection, holiness, and unity. He seeks the spiritual and physical welfare of his followers.

Jesus' prayer is not only an example for us of the importance of intercessory prayer for others. It also speaks of the nature of Jesus; he cares for his followers. Think of how you have felt when you have been told by someone, "I have been praying for you." Usually it is heartening to know that someone has lifted us and our life circumstances to God in prayer. To have Jesus, the Son of God, pray for us even before we existed is heart-warming. We can trust that he continues to intercede on our behalf.

This morning I want to share more about the nature of intercessory prayer. We will then reflect on how we should pray and how God answers prayer.

I appreciate Douglas Steere's understanding of prayer as "caring for souls."ⁱ He suggests that our prayers of intercession are added to the caring love of God. We do not begin the intercession; it is already actively operating, for Paul promises that "the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." The Psalmist promises that God is a Guardian who neither slumbers nor sleeps, but always keeps watch over the flock.

Our prayers of intercession are united with God's ongoing ministry of caring for God's creation. Through prayer we become partners in the caring work of love that God is already doing.

One of the reasons I like Steere's definition is his use of the word care. Oftentimes we confuse care of souls with cure of souls. Cure implies the end of trouble. It suggests that problems will disappear and stop causing trouble. Care of the soul sees life differently. "It appreciates the mystery of human suffering and does not offer the illusion of a problem-free life."ⁱⁱ It recognizes the need for ongoing attention, for life will forever pose challenges. With care for the soul, those challenges can be faced and met with perseverance, fortitude, and the hope of transformation.

Thinking of intercessory prayer as care for souls suggests how we should pray. You may know the story of the woman who by mistake had been omitted from the list of invitees to the priest's garden party. Hearing from another on the morning of the party that he had forgotten to invite her, the priest called her on the phone, apologized for his error, and invited her to come anyway, only to receive her sharp reply, "It's too late for that. I've already prayed for rain." This woman clearly believed that she should pray specifically for what she wanted!

Jesus instructs his disciples to pray in his name (John 16:24). Richard Foster suggests that this means that we pray "in accord with the way and nature of Christ. It means that we are making the kinds of intercessions he would make if he were among us in the flesh. We are his ambassadors, commissioned by him. We have been given his name to use with his full authority. Therefore, the content and the character of our praying must be, of necessity, in unity with his nature."ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, if the content of a prayer is not something to which Jesus would sign his name, perhaps it's not the right way to pray!

Jesus' prayer in John's gospel is a model for us. He prays in generalities for his disciples, for their protection, holiness, and unity. God invites us to ask for what we want. We can ask for specific things in our prayers: for cancer to be cured, for a relationship to be restored, for a job or house to be found. In my earlier years I was probably so bold as to ask for what I wanted. Now, however, I don't tend to ask God for specific things that I want. I don't expect God to break the natural law or intervene in life circumstances as a superhero. I listen for God's guidance and direction as I respond to situations. I pray for healing for those who are ill, understanding that healing is not necessarily a cure, but understanding healing as wholeness and peace, even in the face of a terminal illness.

As a young pastor I was privileged to walk with a woman in her mid-forties as she dealt with terminal cancer. Donna was the third of five living generations in her family. Her own grandmother was still living and she herself was already a grandmother. Donna was undergoing treatment for cancer when I arrived. After

the treatment was complete, Donna regained her strength and participated in the Disciple Bible Study at the church. Our church family rejoiced when she was declared to be in remission. But the day came when the cancer returned. Although Donna was disappointed, she resolved to continue to live. When it became clear that her life would be cut short, Donna did not despair. Through her growth in faith, she had accepted her illness and received the nurturing love of God. Although she died, Donna was healed, for she was whole in spirit.

As I intercede for others, my prayers tend to be a visualization of the person for whom I am praying, placing them in the palm of God's hand. That palm serves as a sort of nest where they can find shelter, rest, comfort, peace, and renewed strength for their journey. In that intimate space close to the heart of God, I trust that their needs are clearly known by God to respond as is fitting. I know that God's will is for their well-being; God knows the fullness of circumstances and what will make them whole.

This means that God's response may not be exactly what we want or hope. We may wish for a broken relationship to be mended, or an illness to disappear, or a decision to be reversed. Again, God will not necessarily break natural law in order to meet our desires. But God will grant us the strength to persevere in the midst of difficulties. The answer to prayer may not be a cure, but it will likely be care administered in various forms. In fact, we are often a piece of the answers to prayers for others. The old Quaker who prayed for the health and strength of his young farmer son-in-law, whose farm yard was often wet and soggy, found himself drawn to send a pair of rubber boots to him for his protection.

John Buchanan tells that Presbyterian missionaries arrived in Korea in 1885. The first of them, a physician by the name of Horace Underwood, started a hospital in Seoul, called Severance Hospital. In 1888 a cholera epidemic struck Korea. The Korean people did what everybody before them did in response to and fear of infectious disease, simply put the sick and dying out into the streets. Christianity began to take root in Korea when Christians went into the streets to the sick and picked them up and carried them to Severance Hospital. The country's leader heard about it and sent emissaries to discover who these angels were who were not afraid to care for the sick and the dying.^{iv}

If intercessory prayer is care of the soul, it may move us beyond words of petition and a movement of the heart. We may be called to action on behalf of one another. Indeed, for some people action is a form of prayer, of being partners in with God in bring about a world that reflects the character of God.

Prayer is the real source of warmth in the Christian community, for prayer connects us with God and with one another. Intercessory prayer is care for the soul. It is one way in which we participate in the healing activity of God. Through prayer we place one another in the palm of God's hand, trusting that God's will is

for our goodness and well-being. Our trouble may not end, but we will be given strength to persevere and endure.

May we warm the hearts of our loved ones, our church, community, and world as we participate with God in the care of souls.

ⁱ Douglas V. Steer, "Intercession: Caring for Souls," *Weavings*, March/April 1989, p.16.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992), pp. 194-195.

^{iv} John Buchanan, "Give Me That Old Time Religion," Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, April 25, 1999.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA