

James 5:13-19
Acts 12:1-17

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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Standing in the Gap

Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.
The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective (*James 5:16*).

While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him." (*Acts 12:5*).

In the Old Testament are repeated stories of the leaders of Israel (Moses, David, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) "standing in the gap," that is taking up a solitary position between the people of Israel and God when no one else was found to plead for the people before God. "Standing in the gap" therefore becomes a compelling image for intercessory prayer, prayer that intercedes for the needs of others.

While I value highly study and teaching, my personal faith rests intimately on what I have experienced of God through prayer. Let me share three very typical examples that happened over just twenty-four hours.

Ten days ago I was a day from leaving the UK, where I spent a week with my dear yet ailing mother. I worked on a number of concerns, and still had two things to accomplish. My mother's tiny Methodist Church in the village closed last year when it got down to a handful of members, so she had no pastor and no church. She needed a church along with pastoral care, and not least, somewhere we might have a memorial service when we lose her. She and I talked about these things, and she had said there was a small Methodist Church in the next village of Longton.

So on Tuesday morning, the day before I returned, at 9:00 am I poured over my devotional for the day, and asked God in prayer that it might be a fruitful one. The best I hoped for was to begin a process making contacts that I could continue after I flew home because most village congregations have few members and no office staff, and pastors often serve multiple churches and live elsewhere.

Then I drove to Longton, but no one quite knew where the Methodist Church was. Finally, someone gave me directions to the edge of the village, on the road leading out to the marshes. The best I could imagine mid-week was leaving a scribbled note in a letter box, hoping that it wouldn't get lost among shuffling feet. I pulled up outside the church, which looked rather forlorn except for a sign on the front steps that read: "Tuesdays 10 am-12 pm, Come in for Tea and Coffee." When this uninvited stranger dropped in you'd think I was royalty. They plied me with hot tea and enough buttered scones to celebrate Wellington's victory at Waterloo. One dear soul, named Julie, called the pastor at home. He was in a meeting but would gladly see me around 11:30 am She even drove me the mile or so to show me the house, before taking me back to my car.

As I had an hour to kill I spent a profitable hour in the village library setting up a home visit for the County Mobile Library, which promised even to loan my mother a machine to play books on CD. Then to the pastor's manse (Methodists in the UK use the old Presbyterian term—they're so civilized!). He greeted me like an old friend, and we talked for an hour. Like me he was a second career pastor, and we had much in common. He had previously spoken with my mother, and promised a subsequent visit. And he offered complete use of the church whenever we should need it for a memorial service.

Just as I was about to leave he said, "It's timely that you should come today because I was scheduled to be out of town all day, but something came up and I couldn't make the trip." I asked what time that was. He thought for a few seconds, and then said "Just a few minutes after 9:00 o'clock." I told him that was exactly the time of my prayer—the time I "found myself standing in the gap" as it were.

The next day I flew back from Manchester. Across the aisle from me and a little in front sat a couple in their forties. An hour or so into the flight I noticed their seat back trays were pretty jammed with multiple cups of water, coffee and a glass of wine. It all looked like an accident waiting to happen. As if on cue he leaned sideways too quickly to look out the window and sent 10 oz. cold water and the wine smack into her lap. She went ballistic. It was the sort of high intensity screaming that made every airline passenger within a fifty mile radius want to climb into a hole. He mously trying to calm her down, but she, in a high-octane frenzy, kept up the tirade. What could *I do*? Well, I thought—“You can pray for them.” So I did. “Lord, please help them according to their needs. In Jesus name. Amen.”

In no time, she quieted herself. We all heaved a sigh of relief. A few minutes later, on returning to her seat, just as I looked back across the aisle, she slipped one arm around his shoulders, leaned over and gave him a big kiss. The rest of the flight they were nestled like honeymooners fully engrossed in each other.

I have no power over such things. All I’m doing is sitting there when God nudges my soul to pray, that is, God invites me to stand in the gap for them. When we pray we are not asking God to take an interest in others, we are showing God our concern for and with them. It’s that solidarity, I’m convinced, that moves God’s response. Had my concern been more for myself, out of my own embarrassment, I’m confident the prayer would have been ineffectual.

When we pray for others we build our own ledger of confidences by our experience of prayers’ effects. The act of prayer becomes self-authenticating. My theological training doesn’t begin to approach that, it only gives me a sort of secondary endorsement, like an “Amen” from a distant corner. St. Anselm saw that almost 1,000 years ago when he spoke of “faith in search of understanding.” The act of faith, as a “leap of faith,” must come first, like a hidden foundation--something to build on. A house without a foundation is a disaster waiting to happen. Which I believe is why so many struggle to embrace faith in these times. The prayer of faith, wrote James, “raises people up.” It brings about healing and cleansing. We’re not talking in this instance about healing of disease but the sort of healing that can lead to a personal resurrection.

There are, nevertheless, conditions with prayer, as with any foundation. In that lovely “in my father’s house are many mansions” passage in John 14, Jesus is saying farewell to his disciples on the eve of his death. Feeling their anxiety he promises them, “Whatever you ask in my name, that I will do. . . . if you ask anything in *My name*, I will do it” (John 14:13-14). To pray in Jesus’ name means to pray with the integrity of what Jesus would ask for, to pray as if from Jesus own lips. That obviously discounts prayers that are preoccupied, like asking God to make someone pay us more attention, when a better solution would be to pay them more attention so as to induce their reciprocity.

The prayer, as James’ letter reminds us, must also be a prayer of faith. I believed that God would fashion a solution to my mother’s dilemma—I just had no expectation of such immediacy. Yet because “faith” can be such a banal word, think of faith building in the context of friendship, friendship with God, something that accrues by trusting. Good prayer is a desire above all for the friendship of God. After all to be a friend is to be in the highest solidarity with another, to support, look-out-for, console, encourage, and frequently to surprise by grace.

A third “condition” goes to integrity in prayer, if God is to take our prayer as more than a frantic gesture. True prayer, said Thomas Merton, is not about the saying of words, it’s about the attitude of the whole being, body, soul and will. All good prayer, he said comes from a self that is converted. As Ted Jennings put it, “If I offer up this prayer, how can I live in contradiction of this prayer.” If we live in contradiction of our prayers, is God’s silence likely to follow?

A fourth consideration is to pray the basics. God already knows what your or others’ needs are. We only assume we do. Besides, isn’t it highly presumptuous to tell God how to fix everything when we, in all honesty, haven’t a clue what or how best to fix things. So, ask simply, “according to their needs.” Which is how I prefer to pray. So,

- pray “in Jesus’ name” and let his name qualify the prayer;
- pray in faith, in active trust;
- pray with your whole being, body and soul;
- pray the basics, “according to their needs”.

Then—watch God’s faithfulness. Amen.