

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany: *On Intercession: A Testimony*

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be ever pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer! – amen*

I have some good news for you this morning: Fr. Ward has asked me to preach so you are already getting a shorter sermon. But if that wasn't enough, he has asked me to keep it to 15 minutes or less, which means we are really getting out of here early today. See, miracles do happen, and that is a good reminder on a day when we are going to talk about intercessory prayer.

I kid, of course; but we are going to talk about intercessory prayer, and more specifically, some of my own testimony about intercessory prayer. But first, allow me to define a few terms and explain some of my own understanding of intercessory prayer. Fr. Ward is going to unpack the discipline of intercessory prayer in more depth next week, so my comments today will be more brief – again, good news for you. So what is intercessory prayer? Besides being a nice "christianese" term whose meaning is often taken for granted, it does actually denote a specific type of prayer – or perhaps a better way to think of it is as a posture or position of prayer. Intercessory prayer is a willingness and attempt to stand in the gap on behalf of an other: it is to stand before the throne of God on behalf of an other, or even, when necessary, it is to stand in defense of an other against the attacks of "the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places," as St. Paul puts it in Ephesians 6:12. In other words, it is more than just praying for someone we know or love, which we should all be doing; instead, it is a more intentional, even intense, intervention on another person's or organization's behalf.

Our motivation for doing so can be multiple and varied: it could be so that they can gain clarity in a decision, it could be because they are being oppressed either physically or spiritually, it could be so that they find freedom in Christ Jesus, or any number of other spiritual motivations. Sometimes the motivation becomes evident through a request from the other; but oftentimes it is born out of our own prayer life and the illumination of the Holy Spirit who presses something upon our heart or mind. I have found in my own prayer life that this illumination is usually accompanied with a desire to fight – the same feeling I would get before an athletic contest. Your experience could be different: it could be a desire to drop to your knees and weep for someone; it could be a desire to worship and proclaim who our God is and how awesome he is; it could be to proclaim the words of Scripture – all of these and more can be forms of prayer and contention for another person.

In Scripture, there are many ready at hand examples of intercessory prayer, but there are two that I want to briefly mention and unpack now. First, recall the account of Abraham contending with the Lord before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18 (you can find it in your pew Bibles on p. 16). What we find in this account is an encounter between Abraham and what is likely the pre-Incarnate Son of God – what we call a Theophany, an appearance of God in physical form in the Old Testament. While it would be easy to get lost here in the theological weeds, I want us instead to notice the encounter itself. We are told that the Lord arrives with two other persons in the form of a man. Amazingly, Abraham recognizes this stranger who shows up out of nowhere in the middle of the desert as the Lord and welcomes him into his tent for refreshments and food. After some time, and a promise, it is time for the Lord to leave in order to accomplish what he came to do – eradicate Sodom and Gomorrah.

Learning of the Lord's plan, Abraham feels moved to intercede for those he knows in the city, especially his nephew, Lot.

If you are there, look at vv. 22-25:

Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the Lord. Abraham came near and said, 'Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?'

Notice that the implication is that Abraham is standing in the gap between the Lord (in front of him) and Sodom (behind him); and from this place in the gap he draws near to the Lord in prayer on behalf of his nephew, Lot. It is just as important for us to notice *how* Abraham prays – with boldness, even to the point of being brazen. This is the prayer of man that knows not just who he prays to, but also who he is in relation to the God to whom he prays. This assurance is born out of repeated experiences and time spent in prayer with the Lord. And of course, let us not miss the outcome of Abraham's prayer: After some back and forth with the Lord, the Lord agrees to spare the city if there is even a small remnant of righteous men in the city. Despite not finding the agreed upon number of righteous, the Lord remembers Abraham and spares Lot and his family by sending them out of the city. In other words, Abraham's intercession for his nephew bore the fruit of salvation for Lot and his family.

The second example is really the first and the last; namely, Jesus Christ who is the Alpha and the Omega, the Firstborn of Creation, the Author of our salvation, and the Head of the Church, or as St. Paul tells us in Ephesians, Jesus is the sum of all things. And as it would turn out, Jesus is the preeminent example of intercessory prayer. Look with me at Romans 8:33-39, which you can find in your pew Bibles on p.1133. Listen to what St. Paul says:

Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, *who also intercedes for us*. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written: 'For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Two things stand out: One, the Ascended Christ is before the throne of God constantly pleading on our behalf. Think about that folks, the one in whom all the things are found, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords is standing before his Father's throne interceding on your behalf; and not just on your behalf, but on behalf of all your loved ones too. That's awesome! St. Paul is so amazed by this and so convinced of Jesus' power in prayer that he declares that nothing can separate us from the Love of God! And number two: The power of Jesus' intercession on our behalf is bound up with the work that he has done for us in his Incarnation, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension. When he stands in the gap between us and his Father, Jesus can forever point back to the work that he did and say: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." "Instead, look at me and my righteousness, which I made evident in my obedience even to death on a Cross." That is indeed *good news!*

And there is more good news, saints (and this is admittedly a bit more abstract, but true nonetheless): Those of us that are baptized into Christ stand with him, as members of his body before the Throne of the Father. Given our position there, we are meant to share in Jesus' ministry of intercession for the World, including but not solely for our neighbors and loved ones. This is but one of the ways that we the Church, both corporately and individually, are the literal hands and feet of our Risen Lord for the life of the world. There is more good news, though; we are not left alone. Look at vv. 26-27 of Romans 8, which is on p. 1132.

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, *but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us* with groaning too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, *because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

In other words, we are empowered to enter into the ministry of intercession through the Holy Spirit's own ministry of intercession in and for us. Even when we don't know what to pray, the Holy Spirit who knows our hearts and minds prays with us filling the gaps.

There is so much more that could be said, and even should be said, but alas, I have promised you a short sermon and I am in danger of breaking my promise, which is not a good look for a priest. So let me turn to some of my own testimony regarding the power of intercessory prayer – and my primary hope in sharing this with you is that you will be encouraged. So first a quick story from my childhood: as my mom tells it, I was 4, which would have made my younger brother, Peter, two – so about a year older than my own boys. Peter had somehow managed to burn his finger and was having a hard time eating dinner as a result. As a last resort, mom asked Peter if he wanted us to pray for him, to which he answered yes. So we all got up from the table and went to the living room and in order to kneel together and pray. Mom says that I prayed that Peter's finger would be healed and that he would be able to eat without pain. After which we got up and went back to the table and Peter ate without any problem; in fact, mom says the pain in Peter's finger never returned. This was a helpful reminder to me and Rebecca that we need to be diligent to teach our children to pray; may it be so for the rest of you parents too. And may it be an encouragement to all of us that God answers even simple prayers.

Unfortunately, this faith filled child grew into a rebel. In fact, I am quite certain that if not for the intercessory prayers of others, I would not be standing here before you – I would either be dead or still lost in the world. Bless the Lord though, my mom and grandma were

diligent in their interceding for me. While I could give you several examples of their prayers being effective, there is one that is sticking in my mind: When I was 24ish I was pretty lost. I had dropped out of school, again, in order "to find myself" and what I would do with my life. The problem, of course, is that I was looking in all the wrong places, if I was even looking at all. Mostly I was working long hours at a restaurant and drinking with my friends; its not usually the best "you" that you find at the bottom of a bottle, and its certainly not the "you" that the Lord has in mind.

Now while all of this was going on, my grandmother was interceding specifically on my behalf asking the Lord to essentially save me from myself; but more specifically she prayed that the Lord would draw me close again and that I would find my way to fulltime ministry – it seems I was the only one unwilling to see what my calling or purpose in life was. Sometime in June, a restlessness began to stir in me and I became increasingly aware that I was stuck in a rut with no way out. About that same time, my parents took a two-week trip to Israel where they met a man who ran a discipleship program for those exploring a call to ministry, especially missions. I distinctly remember the day they got home. It was seven o'clock in the morning, *way* too early for me to be up, but I was. When they saw me they wasted no time in telling me about this discipleship program and how they thought it would be great for me – you see in their own intercessions for me, the Lord had pressed this opportunity on their hearts, so they had already talked to the leader about me joining the team. In fact, the Spirit had already been working in my own heart to the point that when they told me about the program, my spirit literally leapt within me – the only time of my life I could say that about. So heavy was the hand of God in this opportunity that despite not having any money saved or a even a passport when my parents got home, three weeks later I was on a plane with a ticket purchased by someone at my dad's

church and with a passport that the government expedited correctly and quickly – and this was post-9/11!

Not only was this trip a tangible answer to my grandmother's prayer for the Lord to draw me close, but over the course of the year that I was abroad, the Lord continued to draw me closer. And for me that meant not only a great deal of healing, but also a restoring of my calling to a life of ministry before the Lord. It was on this trip that my heart was opened to the possibility of vocational ministry. It was over this year that I began to understand who I was in the Lord and what he had created me to be. Certainly there was more work to be done (and still is), but the seeds for the full answer to my grandma's prayer were planted in that year abroad. So those of you with wayward family or friends, take heart: the Lord is faithful! And saints, he has equipped you for the ministry of intercession through his Holy Spirit in the power of his Son, Jesus Christ. Just as the Lord heard my grandma as she stood in the gap with Jesus on my behalf, he will hear your intercessions for your loved ones and neighbors, *if only you will stand in the gap for them.*

*To the glory of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit - Amen*