



*Prayer Changes Things: You and Me*

September 26, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts are always acceptable in your site oh Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

It is hard not to preach on Esther today, as this is the one time every three years that she appears in the Sunday lectionary. As I mentioned last week, the Bible comes out of a patriarchal culture, and it's important to lift up the stories of faithful women who are the bedrock of our faith. Set in the Persian Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century before Jesus, her story is a masterfully crafted account of a poor woman from a powerless minority, who risks her life and uses her craftily attained power to save the Jewish people from annihilation. The Esther story is also the origin of the Jewish observance of Purim, the exuberant spring holiday where Jewish tradition rejoices in the reversals and the triumphs of the weak over the powerful, with gift-giving, merry-making, and service to the poor.

It's *not* so hard to want to avoid the Gospel lesson. It is another in the series of, to comfortable Westerners, harsh and demanding passages from Mark in which Jesus challenges us to truly be his disciples. It's intimidating. But in the casting out of demons, the Mark passage brings front and center the question of prayer and healing, a theme that is picked up in the letter of James, a letter of instruction written to churches sometime in the first century after Jesus' Resurrection.

The author of James writes that "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up." In a time of medical pandemic; of widespread concerns about the health effects of climate change; of cultural and political sickness and tension; with the burdens and heartaches we carry with us through the week and bring with us on Sunday; when Sunday after Sunday we pray for the Church, the world, and the concerns of a local community—intercessory prayer seems an opportune topic that the Spirit may be inviting us to explore.

In a typical Sunday service, we engage in the five classical kinds of prayer: Adoration of God and God's majesty in power; Thanksgiving to God for God's provision; Confession to God of our sins; Intercession, which is asking for God's help on behalf of others; and Petition, which is asking for God's help on behalf of ourselves. In one of the catechisms I've used, we speak about the "Five Fingers on the Hand of Prayer," one finger to remind us of each kind of prayer. But this morning, we'll focus on Intercessory prayer.

I bet I'm not alone in wondering what is happening when I pray for someone and what I want doesn't happen. Like that a loved one will stop drinking. Or that someone will get a good job. Or that the illness of a loved one will end and that they will recover. Or that our government will engage just policies for the sick, the poor, migrants or to protect our environment, and so forth.

Am I doing something wrong? Are we doing something wrong? I mean, after all, there are lots of Gospel stories of Jesus healing people. And there are also a good number of passages in which Jesus says that if you believe in me, whatever you pray for, you will get. What is it exactly, then, that intercessory prayer does?



*Prayer Changes Things: You and Me*

September 26, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Eighteenth Sunday after  
Pentecost

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Here are my thoughts.

When we pray together with other people, on behalf of other people, whether on Sunday morning, or in small groups, here, at home, or on Zoom, our intercessions build community and trust. They help us to keep praying even when may not feel like it. The prayers that we offer either silently or aloud, on behalf of others, these desires are given wings by the responses that we all make together. In the Men's Prayer group, when one of us finishes our intercessions, we say, "This is my prayer." And the group responds, "This is our prayer." We are not alone in our concerns.

Now, it is impossible to know precisely from a scientific point of view what role intercessory prayer has in bringing about the desired end for others. Is God swayed by our prayers? We have folks who work in hospitals and other medical settings here. Maybe some of you have seen the medical literature on intercessory prayer, strictly protocolled, double-blind tests and so forth. But the results are inconclusive.

And yet. And yet.

Listen to this from former presiding Bishop of the episcopal church Frank Griswold: "Prayer is a form of energy. It is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. To pray for others is to acknowledge and call upon this energy whose dominant characteristic is love, a love which exceeds all we might ask or imagine, a love which transcends boundaries of life and death, of sickness and health, a love that can endure all things and hope all things."

He goes on to write: "The consequence of praying for others lies in God's hands and is beyond our knowing. But this we do know: no energy of the spirit is ever wasted, even though our limited vision may make it impossible to see the fruit of the Spirit's activity. ..."

And he writes further: "The Spirit's movements within us do not always take the form of words and therefore, to think of another and to desire their well-being is in itself prayer."

And finally, he writes: "Prayer may produce peace or quiet confidence in those for whom we pray. Prayer may give *us* an increased capacity to companion them in what they are living or suffering. Our prayer may lead to immediate and tangible support they need, in order to bear their present burdens..."

Frank T. Griswold, *Praying Our Days: A Guide and Companion*, Morehouse Publishing: New York, 2009 pp 47-49

I find that a deep comfort, and an act of faith. *Our prayer for another is never wasted.* I cling to that.

Even more important perhaps is the effect on the person doing the praying. Listen to this from the founder of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, the order of Episcopal monks who have their monastery on the Charles River, on Memorial Drive, right next to the Kennedy School in Cambridge:



*Prayer Changes Things: You and Me*

September 26, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Eighteenth Sunday after  
Pentecost

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

“In praying for others, we learn really and truly to love them. As we approach God on their behalf, we carry the thought of them into the very being of eternal Love, and as we go into the being of the one who is eternal Love, so we learn to love whatever we take with us there.” Richard Meux Benson (1824-1915)

As we pray for others, we will be transformed by the Holy Spirit, bit by bit made whole, lifted up. We become agents of love. However, there is no doubt that this requires persistence. St. Paul tells us to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5.16-18). Jesus tells the story of the persistent widow to encourage his disciples to pray for others (Luke 18.1-8). Prayer for others—even and especially for those who persecute us or make us feel angry or resentful, as well as for those we love—is part of the package we sign up for when we become disciples of Jesus Christ.

Having said that, it doesn't mean we will never feel disappointment anger with God. Of course, we will, and God can handle those. And we will also have feelings of thanksgiving and joy. But if we respond with persistence to the invitation of the Spirit to pray for others, I believe that we ourselves will be transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ. So, when the author of the letter of James writes, “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will lift *them* up,” that means you and I as well. The Lord will save *us* and lift *us* up, as well as the ones for whom pray.

**Amen.**