

11.6.2022 Trinity 21 (St. John 4:46-54)

Throughout Holy Scripture we find countless examples of faithful people praying for the benefit of others. In the Old Testament, we read about such intercessory prayer when Abraham, the father of faith, prays for the righteous who were living in Sodom. The book of Genesis records Abraham approaching God in fervent, heartfelt prayer, and asking, if there were fifty righteous people there, would God save the city for their sake? When the LORD said, *“If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake”* (Genesis 18:26), Abraham continued to intercede on behalf of the people, asking what about forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, or ten? To which God replies, *“For the sake of ten I will not destroy it”* (Genesis 18:32).

It was the faithful intercession of Abraham that saved his nephew, Lot, and his family from destruction, and later we read about Moses, interceding on behalf the rebellious people of Israel through fervent prayer. Whether it's at Mount Sinai, when God threatened to destroy Israel after they'd turned away from Him to worship a golden calf (Exodus 32:1-10), or in the wilderness when the people continually rebelled against the One, True God who'd miraculously delivered them from their oppressors, time and again it is Moses who prayerfully pleads with God to spare these people.

The Old Testament examples of intercessory prayer aren't limited to Abraham and Moses. In Scripture we find David, Samuel, Hezekiah, Elijah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel all approaching God in faithful prayer on behalf of others, and this biblical theme of prayerful intercession continues in the New Testament. There, you'll remember Jesus' first recorded miracle took place at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. At that wedding, when they ran out of wine, it was Mary who interceded by approaching her Son, saying, *“They have no wine.”* The Blessed Virgin Mary, on behalf of the family, made this request to the Son of God, and then, faithfully expecting a miracle she turned to the servants and said, *“Do whatever He tells you”* (John 2:3-4).

Some of the well-known examples of intercessory prayer found in the New Testament would also include Jesus praying for His Apostles, and, He said, *“for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in you, that they also may be in us”* (John 17:20-21). Jesus prayed for us, and in Scripture we are told that He is now *“at the right hand of God - and He is interceding for us”* (Romans

8:34). In the book of Acts we read about the Church “*earnestly praying to God*” for Peter when he was imprisoned (Acts 12:5), and Stephen, the first Christian martyr, following our Lord’s perfect example by prayerfully interceding for the men who killed him, praying for them as Jesus prayed for those who crucified Him, “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*” (Acts 7:60).

You’ll also remember an example of intercessory prayer found in the Gospel passage we read just two weeks ago. In that passage, a paralyzed man was lifted up and carried to Jesus by his friends, and in their loving, selfless act we find a beautiful image of both spiritual and physical intercession, for what this paralyzed man couldn’t accomplish on his own, his friends accomplished for him, and with him. The Scripture tells us, “*When Jesus saw their faith...*” Notice, the text doesn’t say, “*When Jesus saw his faith,*” but instead it reads, “*When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven’*” (Matthew 9:2). In this example we clearly recognize that it’s not only the faith of the paralyzed man, but also the faith of those who interceded on his behalf, those who lifted him up and carried him to our Lord that led to his miraculous healing.

Intercessory prayer is at the heart of the Christian life, and in the many examples we just considered, a truth you can’t help but notice is the way God responds to the faith of the intercessor. When Abraham prayed for the righteous in Sodom, God responded to his faith and spared Lot and his family. When Moses interceded for the rebellious people of Israel, God heard his faithful prayer and spared the nation. When Mary prayed at the wedding in Cana, when she approached her Son on behalf of that family, Jesus responded to her faithful intercession and turned water into wine. God saw *their faith*, and through intercessory prayer mountains were cast into the sea (Mark 11:23).

St. James, in his epistle, tells us, “*The faithful prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective*” (James 5:16 NIV). God responds to the faith of the intercessor. He blesses those for whom we fervently pray, and we see that truth manifested in today’s Gospel reading in a remarkable way as a nobleman prays for his dying son. St. John writes, “*At Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. So Jesus said to him, ‘Unless you see*

signs and wonders you will not believe.’ The official said to Him, ‘Sir, come down before my child dies.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your son will live.’ The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way” (John 4:46-50).

The examples we’ve considered reveal the truth that God responds to the faith of the intercessor. He blesses those for whom we faithfully and fervently pray, and the first thing I’d ask you to notice in this particular example is the encouraging truth that effectual intercessory prayer doesn’t require perfect faith. Jesus said to His disciples, “... *if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:20).*

The smallest seed of faith moves mountains, and it is such faith that we see in the father who asked Jesus to come down and heal his son. Our Lord pointed out the weakness of this man’s faith when he said to him, “*Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.*” My friends, faith that demands a miracle is not faith, that’s sight. Remember the words Jesus said to Thomas when he appeared to him after the Resurrection, “*Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).*

Faith based on the miraculous may be the smallest seed, but our Savior Christ doesn’t reject it. He makes it grow. God “*gives the increase*” of faith (1 Corinthians 3:5-7), and the challenging words Jesus spoke to this man appear to do just that, they strengthen his faith. The father didn’t back down, turn away, or stop interceding for his son. Instead, he said to Jesus, “*Sir, come down before my child dies,*” and in his desperate request we recognize a stronger, more resolute, yet still very imperfect faith.

The father’s words reveal his incorrect belief that Jesus needs to travel to his home, that He must be physically present to heal his dying child. This man has faith enough to believe that Jesus can heal his son, but he does not yet realize that the Christ, the Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent Son of God can “*speak the word only*” and heal this child (Matthew 8:8). The father does not yet realize that the limits of time and space are not obstacles to God, for His infinite power and complete knowledge, as well as His love, grace, and mercy extend to all parts of His creation.

The smallest seed of faith, based on miracles and misunderstandings, weak and imperfect as it may be, is never rejected by God. This is such good news for those of us who still find ourselves praying, *“Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief”* (Mark 9:24). Jesus heard and received this father’s heartfelt intercession for his son, and said to him, *“Go; your son will live.”* Notice once again in this example, like the rest, the truth that *“the faithful prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”* God responds to the faith of the intercessor. He blesses those for whom we faithfully and fervently pray.

The fact that God has chosen, in some mysterious way, to use intercessory prayer as a means of pouring out His grace and mercy upon this world is a truth revealed throughout Holy Scripture. In all of the examples we considered this morning, we recognize the decision to faithfully pray for others directly impacts their lives. What would’ve happened to the paralytic if his friends would not have lifted him up, spiritually and physically, and carried him to our Lord? What would’ve become of the righteous in Sodom if Abraham wouldn’t have interceded on their behalf? The wedding in Cana... The Church praying for Peter... The officials dying son... Through faithful intercessory prayer the family in Cana was blessed, St. Peter was freed from prison, and the child lived.

Intercessory prayer is no small responsibility. It is a calling of infinite importance, and in conclusion let us return once more to the example of Moses in order that we may see how important it is to pray for the people God has entrusted to our faithful intercession. At Mount Sinai, when the people of Israel turned away from God to worship a golden calf, the LORD said to Moses, *“I have seen this people, and they are indeed a stiff-necked people. Now leave Me alone, so that My anger may burn against them and consume them...”* (Exodus 32:9-10). God said, *“Now leave Me alone, so that My anger may burn against them and consume them,”* but Moses, like the other examples we considered this morning, did not leave God alone. He faithfully and fervently interceded for the people he loved, and God spared them.

There are people in your life that God has placed in your care, people He calls you to pray for - faithfully and fervently. Follow the example of the saints who’ve gone before us, pray for those you love, and trust that God will bless them with grace, mercy, and peace as a result of your intercessory prayer.