

“Reaching Out”

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Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

You all might remember the book that came out several years ago, *Eat, Pray Love*. Early on in that story, Elizabeth Gilbert describes a moment in her life that was incredibly painful and difficult. She was going through a very contentious divorce that had driven her into depression. She just needed those divorce papers signed so that she could move on with her life, but her ex-husband and his lawyer kept refusing, demanding more and more concessions. On a night after she had sent the newly negotiated papers back to her ex-husband’s lawyer, she and a friend were driving across country. Elizabeth describes the desperation she felt about getting those papers signed and how her friend was trying to help her. “Well,” said the friend, “I would sign that letter.” Elizabeth paused, then said that if one of her other friends were there, they would sign it, too. Then the two of them started naming all of the people who loved Elizabeth who would sign her letter. Their list went on and on. And when they ran out of people they knew, they started thinking of people of goodwill. “Mother Theresa?” “She’d sign it!” And then they started naming people who were not living anymore: “Gandhi?” “He’s signed it!” “Jesus?” “Yes, he’s signs it!” They did this all night, like a prayer, reaching out to all the people of good will in the world to help Elizabeth begin to heal.

In the morning, they got to their destination and got a call. Her ex-husband had signed the letter. Her long and painful journey was over.

Elizabeth’s story reminds me a little of our Gospel lesson this morning. In that story, the unjust judge finally grants the widow’s petition because she annoys him to death. We are told that, if even such an unjust person will finally give way to endless prayer, then a God who loves us will as well. Maybe there was something about Elizabeth’s and all of her co-signers’ constant prayers that were somehow so annoying that her ex-husband finally signed the letter. Or maybe her plea was so just that God stepped in and whispered grace into her ex’s ear. I don’t know. I certainly have experienced times when my own prayers didn’t seem to have been answered—at least, not in the way that I wanted them answered. But I do know that we can learn something important and wonderful about prayer from this story.

To me, one of the most important parts of prayer is the way it connects us to one another and to God. Prayer is a form of reaching out, of sending energy and love across huge distances. When I think of prayer, I often think of the ceiling of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. In that painting, God is reaching toward Adam, straining every muscle in His arm to get to Adam. And across the sky, across the enormous distance from heaven to earth, God does reach him.

When we pray for each other, that's what we're doing. We're reaching across enormous distances, maybe across the world, to fill the hearts of friends and strangers with love, hope, courage, and our very presence. And my experience is that the one prayed for feels this.

To understand this, let's turn to what it's like for the person being prayed for, either by others or by themselves, for themselves. First and foremost, prayers of petition are a way of asking God to hear us. When we, as people in need of prayer, ask for help, we are praying like the Psalmist: We say, "hear a just cause, oh God, attend to my cry" and "I call upon you, oh God, for you will answer me. Incline your ear to me, hear my words." As I have said in a sermon last month, being heard is one of the most important first steps towards healing. We need to know that someone hears and knows our suffering. We can always, always trust that God will do this, even if the answer isn't the one, we hope for.

Because what we crave so desperately is to be heard and for our needs to be known, the prayers of others for us are truly powerful and healing. This is the second aspect of prayers of petition—they allow us to be heard, known, and loved by others.

I read *Eat, Pray, Love* all those years ago when I was seriously ill and her story of getting people to sign a letter of petition seemed like a good idea. So, as I lay in bed one day, I composed a letter in my head to God, asking that the unknown illness I had be diagnosed. I then started to name all of the people I could think of who would sign it, and as I said their names, I saw their faces in my head. "My mom and dad would definitely sign it. My brother, my kids, and husband. They've signed it." I went through all the people in my church, all the people from my church in Big Rapids where I grew up, all of my parent's friends who loved me since I was a child, then switched to my husband's side of the family and his 5 siblings, their spouses, and children, and his 50 cousins. At times, I would drift off to sleep and then would wake up saying and thinking new names—people I loved who had passed away, people of goodwill who I never knew. On and on this went for hours.

My illness was not diagnosed that day. However, with every name that I spoke, I felt the person's presence and their love. By the end of that day of prayer I felt so completely loved and heard that I didn't need that diagnosis. Whatever I was facing, I knew that I wasn't alone, and that was enough.

Dear Ones, as we continue to be isolated from one another during this time of Covid and as we yearn so desperately to work towards racial equity, this message is particularly important. Whatever you are facing—whether it be illness, isolation, surgery, loss, divorce, Covid, racial injustice, or other forms of prejudice—the love of your community will undergird and encourage you. It will reach out to you from afar, like the God of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. So at your most desperate moments, fill the space you are in with the names and faces of everyone of goodwill that you know or have known—your friends, your family, your church, and all of the saints. You will know that you are not alone. Thanks be to God.