

Christ Prays For Us
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 5:1, 7, 11-12
Reading from the Gospels: John 17:6-19

Perhaps you were the beneficiary. Perhaps you were a witness. Or maybe, you were the intercessor. Whatever the role we play, each day amidst all the vitriol, mendacity, greed, and mistrust, there are grace-tinged moments when a generous soul sees someone in a vulnerable position and chooses to intercede for them. The act of intercession may be dramatic, anonymous, subtle, or life-sustaining. These are acts that occur with surprising regularity, particularly when needs are clearly understood by observant eyes and charitable spirits.

If you ordered a new automobile in the early 1920's, the car was delivered to you sometimes across great distances. Such was the case when a fresh graduate of Tusculum College in Tennessee took a job delivering cars for a couple of years before becoming a teacher. George Britton, grandfather of our own George Hudson, was directed to deliver a car across the country to the west coast, and while driving through California's Yosemite National Park, George came upon a scene along a river that commanded his attention. He saw a young boy struggling in the water, obviously in danger of drowning, and George Britton did not

hesitate to jump in the river to safely bring the struggling boy to shore and reunite him with his grateful family. The relieved and thankful family introduced themselves. The name of the boy who George's grandfather saved from drowning? Get this - Randolph Hearst ... yes ... the boy who would one day be known as Patty's daddy, and yes ... the son of publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst (you know, the inspiration for the movie *Citizen Kane*, "Rosebud").

Overcome with gratitude, Hearst proceeded to present the young George Britton with a blank check. Now, here is a 22-year-old kid, lucky to have two nickels to rub together, receiving a blank check from one of the richest men in the world, but you know what? George tore up the check. Never spoke much about it and sought no attention for it. Chivalry is not dead, or at least it wasn't as late as 1923.

Yet even though you don't hear words like chivalry or gallantry all that much these days, there remains a regular stream of occasions when people, sometimes at great risk, stand in the gap for folks caught in a vulnerable position.

It is hard to believe that this year will mark the 20th anniversary of 9/11. The visuals and memories of the day remain raw and clear. That morning John DeVito was working on the 87th floor of Tower One when the plane hit a few floors above him. The room lurched right and then left, almost throwing DeVito from his chair. He went out into the corridor to investigate, walked past the elevators, then stopped, because, he said, "the rest of the corridor was gone. Where a row of doors had been, I found myself staring down into a hellhole of fire and twisted steel."

DeVito gathered his team of employees and they began to make their way down a complicated stairway system filled with acrid smoke. Making it all the way down to the thirty-fourth floor, DeVito says, "I began to notice something I'd seen without taking it in. In that stairwell jammed with terrified people, there'd been no shoving. Wedged together in a narrow stairway of a burning building, no one pushed ahead of the slow movers. Over and over, I'd witnessed just the opposite! The handicapped given precedence. Men stepping aside for women. The young giving place to the gray-haired. As injured and burn victims were carried past, everyone flattened against the wall, called encouragement,

waited. Same too as the firefighters climbed up. ...About 20 firemen, fully dressed in 90-pound fire suits, and carrying tanks on their backs, pulled themselves up the stairs with the handrail. They were exhausted and drenched in sweat. We met eyes with many of them; thanking each one individually as they ascended. People in the stairwell broke into applause and cheered the men up the stairs."(WTC stairwell comments, Mike Barkley)

To intercede. It can mean the difference between life and death ... or at the least, it can restore your hope for humanity. To intercede. It can be a huge sacrifice or a small gesture. Either way, it provides the recipients with the assurance that they are known, that they have worth, that they are seen, not as an inconvenience, not as a burden, but as an individual whose life circumstances, whose vulnerabilities have no impact on their value in the eyes of the God who cherishes them.

To intercede. It is a primary role of Jesus Christ for us. This is affirmed in *A Declaration of Faith* where it says that in Christ, "we have an advocate in the innermost life of God." Likewise, in Hebrews 7:25, we read, "he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."

On the night of Jesus' arrest, the night before he would offer his life in the most significant act of intercession ever, Christ gathered with his disciples for a meal that in posterity would be remembered as the Last Supper. In John's version, Jesus, with a basin of water and a towel, would wash the feet of his disciples. This humble act would be followed by an extended discourse in which Jesus would specify the ways he would intercede for his followers including the oft-repeated promises of John 14 – "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" – "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever ... You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned..."

An advocate, one who intercedes. Paul affirms this promise when he says, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

To intercede. It is the fundamental act upon which our faith is formed. In Exodus 3, the Lord tells Moses, "'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of

their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians."

To intercede. At the conclusion of Jesus' extended discourse in John, he lifts a prayer of intercession on behalf of those who follow him. Jesus prays, "I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

Reflecting on this prayer, theologian David Cunningham observes that we, as humans, are neither beasts nor gods. Although we frequently allow ourselves to be ruled only by our appetites, we can, because of our capacity for rational thought and ingenuity, rise to a level of forethought, creativity, and abundant gift-giving that aligns us closely with God. Yet, we repeatedly fall away from such communion drawn toward our baser appetites, such as our quests for power, luxury, control over and oppression of and even violence against our neighbor. If we are to return, we need divine intervention. Cunningham says,

"Because Jesus is one person with two natures, Jesus is able to bridge the gap between God and humanity; his close relationships to both provide him with special authority for bringing the gifts of God to the people of God."(David Cunningham, *Feasting on the Word*)

The good Dr. Cunningham doesn't use those last words lightly. "The gifts of God for the people of God." These are the words that Whitney or I say after the Words of Institution just before the congregation comes forward to receive (What do we often call it?) Communion, our outward and visible sign of how Christ has drawn us into fellowship with God. And so it is that Jesus prays here in John, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Because Christ has bound us to himself in love, we have an advocate in the innermost life of God. Because Jesus has bound himself to us in love, we have both a model and a mandate for our call to intercede where we see vulnerability, suffering, injustice, or need. In this same prayer, Jesus says, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one."

Knowing Christ as our advocate, understanding what it has meant to you when in a vulnerable time, someone interceded for you, there arises within us a call to care, a call to represent a love that intercedes not because of merit but by grace. Confirmands, that is the hope behind our prayers for you this day. For as Jesus prayed, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

I've known my friend Janet Goetz for over half of my life. Let me put it this way, next month Donna and I will celebrate our 32nd anniversary and Janet co-hosted an engagement party for us. Anyone who knows Janet marvels at the level of care she shows for others. Well, that characteristic is no accident. Janet's mother, Hazel Lutz, who marched right past 90 a couple of years ago, lives in an assisted-living community in Mount Holly. One night last week, around 8:00pm during the nightly routine of dispensing medications, there was a ruckus in the dining room across the hall from Hazel's room. A resident, possibly in the creeping grasp of dementia, was skewering a black nurse's assistant, showering her with an unrelenting stream of profane racial

epithets. It was ugly. Yet, the nurse's assistant didn't react but kept going about her duties.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on Hazel's door and that same nurse's assistant entered to give Mrs. Lutz her medicine, visibly shaken but trying to retain her composure. She apologized for being a bit behind schedule, explaining just that she had been busy with another patient. Hazel said, in her knowing and perpetually gracious voice, "I heard ... How are you?"

The nurse's assistant, her voice shaking, said, "I was taught to respect all people, but I've never been talked to like that. I feel like I could cry."

Hazel, pointing to the seat beside her said, "Why don't you come sit down with me and we'll just cry together." And so they did.

After a bit, Hazel said, "You know, that wasn't about you." And as the nurse's assistant left to return to her duties, she turned at the door and said, "You will never know what that meant to me."

Jesus prayed, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." We have an advocate in the innermost life of God. Armed with that gift, whose advocate will you be? Amen.