

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

July 31, 2016

“A Friend in the Middle”

Love to Pray, part 4 (based on the sermon by Al VanderGriend)

Luke 11:5-13

It has been a wonderful week in Bellaire, with 60 children and 30 volunteers taking part in our Vacation Bible School program. Then Friday many of us watched as the Steiners dedicated a recreation area for the clients at Grand Traverse Industries in memory of their son. These are beautiful examples of what God does with willing hearts and willing hands when we follow the call to serve others. It is very much a week to celebrate our purpose of making disciples of Jesus Christ who transform the world.

Would you pray with me?

Jesus Christ, thank you for your great love for us. As your church we welcome your Spirit in this place, knowing that you are transforming us and teaching us to be your hands and feet. Help us to celebrate the good things you are doing, and enable to look forward to even more. Teach us not to rest on our laurels, but to always expect your Spirit to continue to mold us and change us as we serve others. We pray this in your precious name. Amen.

Al VanderGriend tells a story of a pastor who received a desperate phone call. “My store keeps getting robbed, and there are drug dealers in front of my place day and night. I’m calling you, pastor, to ask you what you are going to do about it.” The church had always tried to care for the needs of the community but had never received a call like this from a non-believing storekeeper. The pastor’s first question was “Why don’t you call the police?” to which the

storekeeper answered, "I did call the police, but they don't know what to do about it, so I am calling you."

The church did indeed do something about it. The store owner agreed to let a prayer team come down to the store once a week. The pastor and his group prayed in earnest that God protect the store and that the drug dealers would be dealt with. Within four weeks, four drug dealers were arrested! Not only that, but two families that frequented the store were led to Christ, and one began attending their church.

It's a pretty amazing story, and if you listened closely, you heard that there were three main characters involved. #1 - Someone had a need. #2 - God answered that need. And in the middle was #3, the intercessors who prayed.

I know what it's like to be in the middle. In fact, I'm a middle child. I know what it's like when someone comes to ask me for something that I do not have, but I know someone else who may have it.

When someone acts as the go-between, they are an intercessor. On Friday, I saw Representative Triston Cole at the dedication. Triston is our intercessor in Lansing. You can probably think of others who are intercessors. But the point today is, when we are talking about prayer, we all need to be intercessors for someone else. VanderGriend says, "An intercessor is a friend-in-the-middle who, on behalf of another person, pleads for help with the One who can provide."

The story we read today is all about interceding. Jesus told this parable in Luke 11 to explain how each one of us can intercede for others. Personally, I find the pronouns a little confusing, so let me illustrate this parable for you. I need one person to take this backpack and hold it. You are the traveler. I need another person to hold this loaf of bread. You are going to be the provider who is

asleep. (Hopefully that doesn't happen too often during my sermons.) I will be the third person, the intercessor.

Jesus said, suppose one of you has a friend who drops in unexpectedly, and you don't have any bread. You would go to your other friend and plead with him. It's not me that needs the bread, it's my traveling friend. And even though this provider would make excuses, eventually he would give in, not because of our friendship, but because of the boldness of the one who asks.

There are a few things about first century middle-eastern culture that help us to understand this scenario. Hospitality was a matter of life and death. "There were no motels or 24/7 convenience stores in first-century Palestine. It was not unusual for people to travel at night to avoid the heat of the day. Each household baked its own bread which, without preservatives, lasted only a couple of days. Hospitality—providing lodging and food for a visitor—was considered a sacred duty in that day."

Even though you probably don't have people dropping in on you at midnight asking for bread, we still live in a needy world. Around the world and in our own county, people live in poverty. People seek refuge from war and famine. We battle alcoholism, dysfunction, abuse, imprisonment. People all around us are physically or emotionally ill, dejected, lonely, anxious, fearful, and addicted.

There are many needs, and here is the truth: WE cannot meet all the needs of all the people around us. There are a variety of reasons. We lack the resources. People who do not have a biblical worldview will not listen to our advice. Personally, I have watched too many marriages fall apart while I stood by feeling helpless to change it. Even in the church, we have struggles and feelings

of hopelessness and despair, and my words are not changing things. We need to find the friend with bread.

“In a small Palestinian village neighbors would likely know who had bread in the house and who didn’t.” But asking for it at night caused several problems. “Homes were typical one-room structures, and the whole family would sleep on the floor in the same room. Doors were open during the day and closed at night. Opening a door was a noisy affair that could easily waken a whole family.” Parents, you know that sinking feeling, right? You have just finally gotten the baby to sleep after rocking her for two hours, when someone rings the doorbell. Seriously, that’s why in our first house, our kids slept in the basement. The point is, the provider had a multitude of excuses why he couldn’t be bothered.

But here is the important thing: in the story, the friend with bread eventually does respond by giving the host what his friend needs. And clearly this story illustrates a point about God: God is the one who is always able to supply the needs of those around us. Even in the most inconvenient times, we can go to God and expect to receive what we ask according to his will. Our impotence doesn’t matter. God is omnipotent. He is the all-sufficient One who is able to supply any and every need that can possibly arise on earth. And the major difference between God and the provider in this story is that God is gracious to us. God is more willing than a reluctant earthly neighbor, and he is never bothered when we ask for help. He is always willing to hear us and is eager to meet our need. God wants us to ask him, especially when we ask for others’ sakes. God’s willingness to listen and provide is the foundation of our intercession.

So what? So what is our role? Close your eyes and think of someone right now in your life who has a deep spiritual need. Think of the one who is addicted, who is sick, who has lost hope, who doesn't know the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Imagine them receiving what they need from God because you asked on their behalf. Because you interceded, you became the go-between. (You can open your eyes.)

Are you pounding on the door to heaven? Are you asking for the Bread of Life for someone who is starving? Do you reach one hand down to the needy and one hand up to heaven to link the two together?

God needs us as intercessors. This is the divine plan, this is how God has chosen to use us. If anything, we should be honored, we should be motivated to the extreme, because God needs us.

An intercessor has a huge heart. The one who goes between cares so much that they are willing to risk being intrusive in order to get help. This person sacrifices their own time and energy to find the bread. They have compassion. They empathize. They feel the grief and burdens of those in need, often at great personal cost.

The intercessor also has great faith. They are so sure of getting the answer that they go in the middle of the night with confidence to the one who has bread. How often have you prayed deep into the night because your heart was so burdened for someone else? Do you have the faith that God will always act according to his character and promises? VanderGriend notes that the faith of the intercessor is clearly a factor in God's response to prayer. For instance, in the healing of the paralytic whom four friends lowered through the roof of a house,

the Bible says, "Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" (Mark 2:5).

To be an intercessor you have to be bold. You have to be relentless. Like a bulldog grabbing a toy and not letting go. The Bible indicates to us not all prayer is easy. There are times we need to be bold, shameless, and persistent. There will be obstacles, delays. None of that should stop us. Jesus teaches us that this boldness and perseverance will help us be victorious in the end.

James 5:16 says that the prayer of a righteous person is "power and effective." Something always happens when we pray. It may not always be exactly what we pray for. We may not always see the answer, but God, true to his promise, acts in response to our prayer in ways that are in line with his character, his promises, and his good plan for the lives of the people we pray for.

God wants you to be the friend in the middle, the way Jesus is our friend in the middle. There are so many people who can't pray, don't pray, and won't pray. It's up to us to intercede for them. It's up to us to take our 24-hour access to the throne of God and plead on their behalf. If you believe in Jesus Christ, and I know you do, you have that access. Use it. Be the one who reaches down to a needy world and connects it with heaven's blessing.

In the end, it's not our eloquence or structure or wordiness or quantity of prayers that makes a difference. It's our passion and faithfulness of our prayers that will change the world.

Memory verse

Luke 11:10 - "For everyone who asks received; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."

Reflection questions

1. Who in your life is the like the traveler who came at midnight? What kind of help do they need that is beyond your ability to provide?
2. What are you willing to do to see that others get what they need from God?
3. How can your prayers shape what God does in your home, your work, your church, and your nation?
4. Do your prayers tend to be local or global? How can you focus on making them both?
5. What non-believers do you know that you can pray for? What are their needs?
6. Whom are you praying for to receive salvation? Imagine God answering your prayer. Does that encourage you?