

Listen! Hearing That Still, Small Voice and Finding Your Own
Part 4: Prayer and Healing
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Scripture: Mark 5:24-34

A large crowd followed Jesus and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

A pastor named William McNamara once shared a fantasy about how he would like to respond to someone who asks, "Pastor, say a *little prayer* for us before we begin." This is what he'd like to say:

*"I will not! There are no **little** prayers! Prayer enters the lion's den, brings us before the holy where it is uncertain whether we will come back alive or sane, for it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living Lord."*

As a minister myself, I sympathize with Rev. McNamara's fantasy. Yet I also think it must be acknowledged that when we pray for the health of another, for instance, the effects of these prayers may be elusive, making them seem quite "little."

Jesus taught his disciples that prayer is like a person calling to his friend over and over again in the middle of the night to get out of bed and lend him a few loaves of bread:

"I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs." (Luke 11:5-8)

There may be no "little prayers," but apparently they need to be made repeatedly if they are to have much effect.

Years ago, a friend of mine who regularly speaks about religion around the world rejected all forms of intercessory prayer after his wife became the recipient of hundreds if not thousands of daily prayers following a terminal cancer diagnosis. The reason for his objection was not that he felt the prayers were ineffectual. Indeed, he became convinced that the prayers may have been responsible for extending his wife's life for several years beyond the original prediction. Yet it was for this very reason that he rejected prayer. "How

is it fair," he asked, "that my wife's life should be extended when someone with the same condition, but without the prayer network, would die earlier?"

It's a fair question. If God is both good and omnipotent, why would God need to be persuaded by even a single prayer to heal someone? Shouldn't God just heal them without being asked, if God has the ability?

These objections, as logical and heartfelt as they are, are based on an assumption that prayer is about *persuading* God to act, as if God, like the man in Jesus' parable, is comfortably tucked into bed somewhere up in heaven and can't be bothered unless given strong reason for coming down to help us.

Yet, what if intercessory prayer isn't about persuading God to do anything, but about persistence? What if prayer is a tool God has given us to use, much as God has given us other tools, like intellect, compassion, and so forth?

Quantum physics tells us that everything we see around us is 99.99999% empty space. On a relative scale, the distance between the nucleus of an atom and its encircling electron cloud is as great as the distance between the earth and the sun. What holds everything together is some form of energy that science is at pains to understand or explain. In fact, even to call it "energy" is more of an educated guess than anything else.

Could it be that prayer is capable of moving healing energy to a person we're praying for?

In Mark's Gospel we hear about a woman who was healed from her hemorrhage after merely touching Jesus's garments. Mark says Jesus became aware of the woman not because he felt her touch but because because "*power had gone forth* from him."

While I'm skeptical that many, if any of us who are not Jesus can heal someone in a single burst of power, there is growing evidence that prayer moves energy, in ways we do not understand. While the evidence isn't conclusive, a growing number of scientific studies suggest that prayer may have healing effects. Even when prayer doesn't *cure* a person, some form of healing may occur nonetheless. That is, the disease may not be removed, but the dis-ease inside a person is reduced.

My theory – which is shared by many scientists these days – is that prayer moves energy that is quite subtle. It may even pass through dimensions that are currently unknown to us. At least, the energy doesn't seem to follow a direct path from prayer to cure. Whatever it does, there seems to be a cumulative effect to it – such that it becomes more powerful with both frequency and the numbers of people praying. This may be one reason why Jesus tells us that *persistence* is more important than persuasion when it comes to prayer. It may also be why he indicates that there is greater power "when two or three are gathered in my name."

I'm not suggesting that everyone can be healed if only enough people pray, or even pray persistently. Just as the human body responds differently to different forms of medicine depending on a number of complex factors, so it is with prayer. Different forms of prayer move energy differently, and the body responds differently depending on its current state.

And of course, there is always God's will to consider. Sometimes, it may be God's will that a person pass on to the next Realm before we – or they – are willing to let go. Our Buddhist and Hindu friends remind us that Karma may also play a role – in such a way that a person's spiritual development may require a particular form of physical challenge in order to facilitate this growth.

In any case, I must confess that I have not always believed that intercessory prayer did anything meaningful other than perhaps relieve a little stress within the one doing the praying and sometimes the one being prayed for. My understanding changed dramatically in 2008.

If you've read *Gifts of the Dark Wood*, you'll know 2008 was the year that my eldest daughter, Arianna, was diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumor known as an *astrocytoma*. Arianna was 17 at the time.

When Arianna was originally diagnosed with a brain tumor, it was like the rug was pulled out from under us and we fell hard to the floor. When we learned that the tumor was *malignant*, it was like a trap door opened beneath us. We fell into seemingly bottomless despair and confusion. Any light in our eyes was gone. So was our mental and emotional energy.

While there is never a "good" time or place to have a brain tumor, it turns out that both time and place were quite fortunate. Since I had just left a 300-member congregation in Scottsdale to serve a 1,500-member congregation in Omaha, and we were immediately put on prayer chains in these congregations as well as scores of churches across the country. We literally had thousands of people praying fervently for us each and every day, for months. (Quite a number pray regularly for Arianna to this day.)

As the days progressed, we began to experience something quite mysterious. It was the feeling of *being held*. Held by an energy coming from beyond ourselves. Even as our emotions were on a terrifying roller coaster, that feeling of being held was rock solid. It never went away. It was clear as day to us that we were experiencing the energies of all those prayers.

It is possible that these prayers played a role in the success of the two surgeries Arianna underwent in the three months following her diagnosis. These surgeries were able to resect about 95% of the tumor without any deterioration of mental function and only the most subtle effect on her motor ability in her right leg.

Then again, it was not only timing, but place, that worked in Arianna's favor. As it happened, a world-class brain surgeon, Dr. Michele Aizenberg, resided in Omaha. She became Arianna's surgeon and employed absolute state-of-the-art technology and technique in her surgeries.

Whatever effect prayer played on the success of these surgeries – and perhaps even in the selection of surgeon – it has always been quite clear what effect all these prayers had on our whole family in our time of greatest crisis.

This experience convinced me that prayer moves energy. Yet, I also realized that if prayer does move energy, it may be capable of moving negative energy as well as positive.

This might explain why human beings have perennially been concerned about curses and sought to ward them off in various ways. It may also be the reason why Jesus was so insistent on directing the power of love even toward our enemies, lest we inflict harm on others consciously or unconsciously (Matt 5:43-46). Anger or hatred may literally harm others in subtle ways.

This may also be why Jesus instructs his followers to make peace with their brother or sister before entering a sanctuary and approaching God's altar (Matt 5:23-25).

Have you ever thought of this, by the way? When you remain angry at a particular person over a long period of time, you may very well be doing them harm. The same may happen in reverse if someone is angry at you for a long period of time. This may be why forgiveness is so important within Christianity and other faiths. It is definitely why a number of mystical traditions within various faiths teach techniques for shielding a person from negative outside energies. I do this myself. I do it particularly when I'm feeling out of sorts and can't find an obvious reason for it. Often, merely undergoing a "shielding" routine will clear the dis-ease within me in a matter of minutes.

In any case, back in 2008, I realized that if prayer is capable of moving negative energy as well as positive, then even though I might seek with all my heart to send healing energies toward Arianna, the anxiety and fear I naturally feel as her father might also be conveyed to her. In other words, I might cause more harm than good!

Since I wasn't about to step away from praying for Arianna – especially since I had recently become so convinced that it might help her in some way – this drove me to experimenting with various prayer techniques that would allow me to pass along only positive, healthy energy to my daughter.

It is this technique that I will pass along to you this morning, in the hopes you and those you pray for may benefit as much as I and others have.

Before I do, let me update you on Arianna: While Arianna still has a small amount of cancer in her brain, and had to undergo another surgery after *Gifts of the Dark Wood* was published in 2015, her tumor has never upgraded beyond "low level". Tumors, like human beings, always want to upgrade. The fact that hers has not, even after 15 years, is highly unusual.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, her tumor once again started growing back a little. So, our family had the "fortune" of dealing with a lot more than COVID! While her motor functions had re-wired too close to the tumor site to make another surgery possible, she was "miraculously" able to start taking experimental medication that targets her exact kind of tumor, even though she did not qualify for the clinical trial. Even though the medication is only meant to inhibit the tumor's growth, "miraculously" her tumor has actually been shrinking little by little.

Again, we can't know what effect prayer has had in all of this, but what is certain is that many people who started praying for Arianna in 2008 continue to pray for her regularly to this day, even daily. And she is doing amazingly well. This coming August, in fact, she will be married to the love of her life – Graham Pansing-Brooks – who she met when she came to Omaha in 2020 to have the surgery that ultimately couldn't take place.

Eric's Guidelines for Intercessory Prayer

1. The first person you want to focus on is not the person for whom you are praying, but you

When you fly somewhere and the crew tells you what to do in case the plane loses cabin pressure, you are instructed to put your own oxygen mask on before trying to help anyone else. It works the same way with intercessory prayer. Before I pray for another person, I pray for myself. I take time to get quiet and calm. I also take time to invoke the Holy Spirit's presence. I don't need to persuade the Spirit to help, but I do believe that prayer harnesses energy that is as deeply spiritual as it is personal. As spiritual energy, I believe it is important to both to connect to the Source of energy and to not stand in the way of it. So, I bow inwardly to the Holy Spirit, as an act of surrender and as a way of opening myself to the Spirit in any way She may work.

Since my ultimate goal is to direct healing energies to the precise area in Arianna's brain where her tumor resides, and in a way that ensures that only positive, healing energies are conveyed without fear or anxiety attached, I first focus on drawing the Spirit's healing energies into my own brain.

I picture an aperture opening above my head and invite healing energy to steam into the very area where Arianna's tumor resides – about halfway between the center left and front area. I don't pray for any cancer cells to die. This is because I am praying for my own brain first, and also because I don't want to direct any kind of deadly energy into the brain of my daughter when I begin focusing on her. Instead, I focus on inviting any sick cells to either be restored to health, or simply be washed away if they cannot be healed.

Incidentally, if I'm praying for someone with an emotional or spiritual ailment, I still direct energy into myself first. If I can't locate a similar struggle within me to pray for, I look for an inner struggle that is in some way analogous to it.

After several minutes of focusing on my self, I often start feeling both physical and emotional sensations. When praying for Arianna, that area of my brain often starts to feel tingly, or warm, or "energetic," or even "fuller." Emotionally, I will frequently experience a sense of euphoria, of grace, of joy, or of wonder.

2. Direct God's vital energy to the recipient of your prayer

Once I begin to sense that my own brain is responding vitally, I start envisioning the same energy flowing through me into Arianna's brain. I normally move lightly in and out of awareness of Arianna, concentrating on her, then on me and my brain to make sure I'm continuing to welcome the energy in, then back again on her.

After several minutes (sometimes much longer), I gently pull away from my thoughts about Arianna and move on to other people or subjects I wish to pray about.

3. Give thanks

Finally, I thank the Spirit for the privilege of praying for Arianna, and for anything else I am grateful for at the time.

Of course, I cannot know for sure that my prayers have had any effect on Arianna, but of one thing I can be certain: *They affected me.* Given the mind/body connection, it is entirely possible that praying for Arianna promotes my own brain's health and vitality. Most certainly my prayers set me in a state of peace, joy, creativity, and wonder in a situation where I might otherwise lose my nerve.

I also know that, by praying for Arianna, I become more deeply bound to her, my family as a whole, with others who pray for her, and to our God. Whatever effect this form of entanglement has is ultimately in God's hands, but I trust it brings significant blessing and benefit no matter what happens ultimately to the cancer.

End Note:

If you want help with intercessory prayer, I suggest trying one of the Four Bow Meditations I've been posting on YouTube. You can get there directly by going to www.FourBows.org.