

A PRAYER PROBLEM

Dear Jean

I have a prayer problem. I thought first of you. Will you help me?

What does it mean when Jesus says to go into your closet to pray? To pray in secret? When he talks of acts of love, what does it mean not to let the right hand know what the left hand is doing? How do these admonitions apply to all those generous people who told me, who keep telling me, that they are praying for me? My problem is, how do these admonitions apply to me? . . .

When I was first stricken and helpless, there was a palpable sense of being carried by the prayers of dozens of intertwining communities and people of faith. I knew they were praying. They told me. While I was too broken and exhausted and confused to know what or how to pray, the Spirit—through those faithful ones—was praying in and for us. I knew they were praying, because they told me. These people of prayer kept me alive.

Having experienced the work of the Spirit through the prayers of the people, many people, I knew I was called to pray for others. How will they know if I do not tell them? People of prayer carried me and kept me alive. I can do no other.

I tell them. I write letters and make telephone calls. I wrap my arms around them and whisper the words; I take their hands and promise I am praying. I send e-mail messages. . . .

How can I not tell them? I want them to know they are remembered. People of faith remember and pray for one another. So many do not remember. They think we are fine. They see us working and laughing. They think we must have moved through all those mythical “stages” and now we are fine. But they do not understand. They do not know that we wake up every morning and say, “I wonder how it will be today.”

Praying in secret? The praying may be in secret, but I cannot leave it there. I know the palpable sense of being carried by the prayers of dozens of intertwining communities and people of faith, because they told me. Is that not what I am called to do? I could say, “Paul did it.” I should do it because Paul did it. In each letter he wrote, Paul told those first Christians that he was praying for them. He asked them to pray for him and for one another. Surely he had heard the admonitions about praying in secret. Still he reminded the people of his prayers each time he spoke with them.

You may shake your head and wonder why I ask these questions. Maybe it is because this all seems new to me. So much changed when Mark died. Everything changed when Mark died. I believe the prayers of God’s people kept me alive. I am called to pray, and I want to do it faithfully.

I received a call once from an older friend. “I am calling from the hospital. I had a little heart attack and am waiting for some tests. You don’t need to come over. I don’t want to spread the word around. I am okay. Just thought maybe a little prayer would be fine.”

Then his voice broke. “I really am all right,” he assured me. A little heart attack. A little prayer would be fine. I tell him each time we talk that I pray for him, because his family has faced some hard times. So he called me to pray for him.

I know I do not pray as often as many do. I have not studied much of the history and theology and practices of prayer. I am not a better pray-er than somebody else. I do tell people when I am praying for them. So I am the one my friend calls: “Just thought maybe a little prayer would be fine.”

Why don’t more people do that? Maybe they do not know what it means to feel broken and helpless, and to hear that someone else is carrying them in prayer. Maybe they believe they are supposed to keep it secret. Maybe I am supposed to keep secret. But I cannot do that. I know that the prayers of faithful people kept me alive.

Prayer remains for me one of God’s many mysteries. And so also, perhaps, is what comes after prayer. To tell or not to tell? Perhaps it is not a problem. It is part of the mystery.

I tell, and whatever else happens is mystery in God’s hands. When I cannot tell, whatever else happens is mystery in God’s hands. You will understand that also.

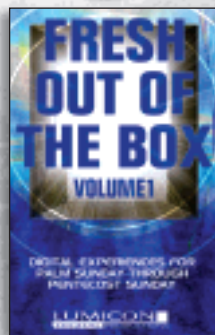
Susan

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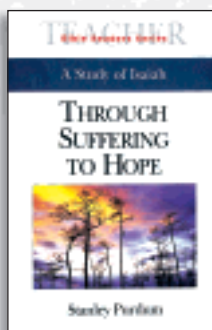
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