

Praying for A Grieving City: Bridging the Gap Through Intercession

As I write this it has been just over three months since a young white male drove several hours from his hometown near the New York-Pennsylvania border to my hometown, the city of Buffalo, NY, to target African American men and women in an act of premeditated, racially motivated, domestic terror. Within moments after the shooting started ten lay dead and another three critically injured at the only supermarket of its kind in a zip code populated by a staggering 78 percent black population -a statistic not lost on the shooter.

Within moments and then hours the ripple effects of what had happened were felt through the local community, the city at large, its suburbs and then into the hearts and minds of the national and international communities. First responders, politicians, clergy, community leaders and media commentators alike -some reeling, all looking for answers, began to divulge, relay, and interpret breaking news.

Buffalo, like any city, has its fair share of violent crimes. But the impact of this particular tragedy hits a different nerve. Listed as one of the most segregated cities in America the impact of a racially motivated terror attack like this only serves to heighten the disparity felt across ethnic lines. And herein lies a fundamental problem on both a social and a spiritual level. What can we do to bridge this immense gap? It doesn't take someone like me to point out the enormous contrast between the history of both black and white in our nation.

There continue to exist a myriad of proposals from politicians, cultural leaders, and everyday folks as to how to fix the many problems stemming from ethnic divide. However, one particular arena of influence interests me most of all -that of the church. The church of Jesus Christ possesses a key that no other people group has. We have been given the key to reconciliation.

In the midst of egregious division between ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic class Paul writes to the church gathered in Ephesus, *"But now in Christ Jesus [you all] who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made [all] one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man...thus making peace, and that He might reconcile [us all] to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity."* -Eph.2:13-16.

Putting enmity to death gets to the heart of the matter. Enmity is another word for hostility. The hostility between mankind must be put to death. Death is often the result of hostility but hostility itself needs to be judged -and was at the cross on which Jesus suffered and died. What this means for those who love and follow Jesus is that the ancient and inherent hostility toward fellow man no longer needs to dominate and fuel the way that we live. We are free to walk out from underneath its cruel bondage and follow the Holy Spirit's leadership as we love and serve those who seem to be so different from us.

Over the years I have had the privilege to listen to black friends, some of whom are pastors and ministry leaders, as they share their hearts, and often their pain, related to the marginalization of

the black community -particularly within the scope of a city-wide church. How often has been unearthed a unique pain stemming from what many times are sincere but surface-level attempts to address or help to fix underlying problems related to marginalization, poverty, crime, and crisis? The scriptures compel us to reach far beyond the realm of table-talk and good-will gesturing and deep into a reality where we bear one another's burdens -thereby fulfilling the law of Christ.

"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." -Gal.6:2

Fulfilling the Law of Christ

This translation offered by the New King James Version of the New Testament is probably not the best for simplifying what the apostle Paul was trying to say. The phrase translated as "*the law of Christ*" has at its essence this meaning – "*the law's true meaning, one which Jesus Himself upholds.*"

That is to say that bearing one another's burdens is at the heart of the commandments -of which Jesus Himself readily approves.

" This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." -John 15:12-13

Bear One Another's Burdens

The idea of bearing one another's burdens isn't intended to be overly complex. We are to assist others with those physical, emotional, and spiritual realities which are too heavy to be carried alone -particularly in areas of grief, worry, sorrow and illness. The Greek word which Paul uses for *burdens* in Gal.6:2 refers to a hardship which is regarded as particularly burdensome and exhausting. The scriptures actually require us to intervene in one another's lives when we see each other teetering underneath the weight of circumstances, sickness, poverty, abuse, and gross emotional strain. There are two arenas in which we are to engage in this. The practical and the spiritual. Practically we are to participate in the giving of our time, resources, and abilities whatever those may be. Secondly, we are called to intercede for one another spiritually in the place of prayer.

"...pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." -James 5:16

The Spirit That Helps Us to Pray

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Prayer. He helps us to pray in our weakness (Rom.8:26-27). In Hebrews 8:26 Jesus is described as our eternal intercessor. The Spirit desires to affect the work of intercession in us just as He did for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane shortly before His crucifixion. There Jesus agonized under the crushing weight of some spiritual burden -one which

worked in concert with the tremendous stirring of His deep emotion -the expression of which produced deep groanings and intense physical manifestations (Lk.22:44).

“And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me.” -Matt.26:37-38

Paul taught that the Holy Spirit helps us to pray in the midst of our weakness. In the Greek of its time, the meaning of this particular word, *weakness*, is a bit more nuanced than that of one broadly referring to our physical stamina. It points specifically to our inability -especially because of a lack of experience. The idea is that we are limited and therefore actually incapable of praying effectively about certain things because we have not experienced them ourselves. Many of us have felt uncomfortable when faced with the thought of consoling another in the wake of tragedy or a death because we simply don't know what to say -often because we have not felt the same pain or have had the same experience.

In the same way that Jesus began to be sorrowful and distressed in the Garden of Gethsemane the Holy Spirit will cause us to experience the emotional and spiritual weight of another's pain -or even God's own, so that we will begin to pray from the deep places of our heart. This is what spiritual burden-bearing looks like. When the weight of your pain becomes my pain then your cries will become my cries. When I pray through those cries, I am bringing the pain of another before the Lord and helping to give voice to those who may not have the strength or ability to cry out for themselves.

Consider this. *“Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us, you also helping together in prayer for us, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift granted to us through many.” -2 Cor.1:9-11*

In the book of Zechariah, we see the Lord releasing a divine enablement to pray over the city of Jerusalem at the end of the age. *“And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn. In that day there shall be a great mourning in Jerusalem...” -Zechariah 12:10*

This supply of the Spirit's enablement to pray will produce a mourning and grief over the pain of Israel's rejection of their Messiah. In that day the inhabitants of Jerusalem will feel the intensity of God's longing for His chosen people. Healing begins as the pain surfaces and is ushered before the Lord and offered as a sacrifice upon the altar of intercession.

The Inconvenience of Being Burdened

“O Lord, You induced me, and I was persuaded; You are stronger than I, and have prevailed. I am in derision daily; Everyone mocks me. For when I spoke, I cried out; I shouted, “Violence and plunder!” Because the word of the Lord was made to me a reproach and a derision daily. Then I said, “I will not make mention of Him, nor speak anymore in His name.” But His word was in my

heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not.”
-Jer.20:7-9

In the above text Jeremiah laments the burden of the Lord’s word to him for Jerusalem. He cries out to the Lord in His pain, *“This isn’t fair, You tricked me! I don’t like bearing Your burden for the people of Israel. It’s too costly. My life is completely turned upside down -and not for the better!”*

Simply put, the problem with bearing one another’s burden is that its uncomfortable and inconvenient. Unfortunately for our flesh the cross bids us come and die -but then therein lies the secret. One cannot know the power of the resurrection without touching the pain of death. To wear the mantle of intercession is to know the pain of a broken world.

The prophet Zechariah saw a vision of angelic couriers riding on horses returning from patrolling the territory of the Persian empire. These angelic messengers gave a report to the Angel of the Lord as to the state of affairs in the empire -all was peaceful and resting quietly. While this would seem to indicate good news -at least to Persian officials, from God’s perspective it was troubling. Why? Because God’s perspective on world affairs is so vastly different than ours. He saw that the plight and purpose of Israel was central to world affairs. It was scandalous that His people would be mired in difficulty while the surrounding peoples lived in relative ease and detached from His purposes. How true is it today that in many respects we lived detached, sometimes willfully, from the suffering of our neighbors -the men, women, and children that make up the population of our cities?

For some this word still stands trues today, *“Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.”* -Ezekiel 16:49

Jesus Our Intercessor

God Himself is the ultimate example of an intercessory burden-bearer. He took upon Him the plight of broken humanity by becoming human. As He lived among those He created He embraced their sufferings -our sufferings. He was all too familiar with death, poverty, cruelty, injustice, illness, grief, worry and fear reigning in the lives and experiences of those around Him.

He was not exempt from feeling the pain of a sinful world. He didn’t only come and die. He drank deep of the grief and sorrow of a fallen world. *“He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.”* -Is.53:3

We are called to be conformed to the image of Christ that the fragrance of His life might be poured out from us as we endure the same sufferings which He suffered (Mk.10:37). We are to mourn with those that mourn and to comfort the afflicted in their grief. All of this is accomplished by yielding -not shielding, ourselves from the work of the Holy Spirit.

Walking In the Power of the Resurrection

Even as burden bearing brings with it an aspect of pain and suffering this is not the end goal of our intercession. In a biblical theology, weakness leads to power, suffering to glorification and death

to resurrection. This is the sure hope of our labors. We weep with those who weep that someday we might rejoice with those who rejoice. In Christ we engage in the ministry of sharing one another's burdens with the confidence that in time our intercession will give birth to restoration and reformation. The glory of the cross is not seen primarily in its suffering but in its resurrection. Jesus bore the burden of a sin-sick world unto His death in order that He might become the firstborn among many brethren. He carried our death that we might receive His life. In intercession, we share in the grief of others so that they may share in our hope. Intercession is a divine transaction of glory.

Praying for a city in crisis involves bearing in its pain so that we might become agents of reconciliation between God and man. A spirit of renewal is always carried in the womb of intercession. Somebody somewhere must be willing to engage in the difficult work of bringing forth the purposes of God in the realm of the Spirit.

May tragedy turn to triumph in our city and may we become willing to live an uncomfortable life for the sake of others. May the purposes of God for Buffalo, NY be birthed through a praying people willing to yield themselves to the leadership of the Spirit in the place of prayer.