



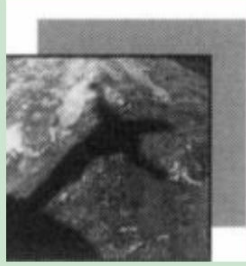
**THEOLOGICAL
REFLECTIONS
ON PRAYER**

in

**GOD'S
PRESENCE**

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CHAPTER FOUR

Intercessory Prayer

What happens in our prayers for others? Sometimes the theologian in all of us is not content simply with statements and practice; we have the notion that we must know “how it works.” I often remember with amusement the climactic scene from *The Wizard of Oz*: The wizard, Dorothy, and Toto are in the basket of the balloon, ready to leave for Kansas, when Toto leaps out, and Dorothy after him. At that moment the balloon begins to rise. “Come back, come back,” calls Dorothy, to which the wizard replies, “I can’t! I don’t know how it works!” A sense of “how it works” will enhance our use of the rather astounding privilege of prayer.

I have suggested that God has an effect upon how and what this universe is and is becoming, and that this universe has a return effect upon God. In this dance of relation, imagine what prayer might be like from God's perspective. Do not shrink from such an imagining, for all theology spins from the power we have to think beyond ourselves. The God who is more than all our theologies can handle our imaginings, and perhaps strengthens us through them. So, then, imagine this dance between God and the universe as it might be from God's perspective.

First, look more closely into how relationships affect us, as human beings. We are continuously affected by that which is more than ourselves, whether personal, societal, or environmental. Whom we know, and how intimately we know them, affects who we are. We are not totally determined by these relationships, for we have the ability to respond to each out of some degree of freedom. Over time our character develops out of the interplay between those things that influence us and our freely chosen responses. And just as we have been affected by those to whom we relate, even so they are affected by our response to them. Relationships create an ongoing dance of influence, response, and influence once again, and in the process, we develop and express our own characters.

Imagine that it is somewhat like this for God. God, too, has a freely chosen character from everlasting to everlasting. But God's character, like ours, is expressed in responsiveness to relationships throughout the universe—for there would be nothing to which God did not relate. God receives the

influences given by each relationship, and responds to each. Imagine that God's own deepest character is freely manifested according to the various conditions of all sorts of people and things in all sorts of places. God "meets our condition," as the Quakers say, and this "meeting" is shaped by God in response to each aspect of creation God touches.

To imagine how God experiences intercessory prayer under these circumstances, consider that since God relates to each aspect of creation in all of creation's varied time frames, then no matter how remote two persons may be from each other, there is a sense in which they "meet" in God. The same God receives the influences of both of them, and responds to both of them, according to God's own character and to the particular circumstances of each. This would be true for strangers who think of God in entirely different ways; it would also be true for the dearest of friends. If God responsively feels every aspect of creation, wherever it may be, then all things and all persons eventually meet in God through God's feelings of them and for them.

In order to clarify the implications for intercessory prayer, let me describe for you one person's situation. I went to Korea, and there met a man in considerable need whose condition touched my heart. I know only a little of his full situation, but God knows it all. It appears to me that the man was treated unjustly, suffering grievously through his mistreatment. In every moment of this man's existence God feels his pain, along with the fullness of its causes, including whatever responsibility the man himself contributed to his condition. And God touches him with an impulse toward his own transformative

good. That touch comes unfailingly, even in the midst of the man's struggle with the consequences of the injustice he received. God doesn't turn the injustice into pretense; God doesn't render it invisible; God doesn't suggest to the man that he simply override the injustice as if it didn't exist. Should God so act, then God would not be meeting this man's real condition. Instead, God weaves together all the circumstances of the man's world, blends them with what is yet possible from the depths of God's own character in relation to these circumstances, and offers the consequent possibility to the man as an impulse for his good. What God gives him comes from the fullness of what the man is dealing with, how the man is dealing with it, and God's own faithful response.

What this means is that the man's good is limited by his circumstances. He is hedged in, as it were, by the reality of his harsh situation, and God must work with that situation as it is. Insofar as the man's associates view him with ill will, God must take that ill will into consideration—into the divine weaving—as God works toward that man's true good. Insofar as he has lost his job and struggles to buy daily bread for himself and his family, this, too, is part of the material with which God must work. Given the fullness of these circumstances, there is only so much good that can be offered, for the situation is bad. What God can do for him—for us—is reality based, not magically based. The transforming good that God can offer the man must meet the harshness of his conditions, even though tempered as much as possible by the divine character.

I am in America—separated by time, geography, and

culture from this Korean. But in God we meet. When I pray for his well-being, I make myself relevant to his condition. It means that as God weaves together the circumstances of that man in order to fashion his best possibility for the next moment of his becoming, my praying offers new stuff for the weaving. The ill will of others is countered to some extent by the goodwill of those who pray for him. And this goodwill becomes part of his relevant world. Since God works with the world as it is in order to bring it to what it can be, intercessory praying changes what that world is relative to that one for whom we pray, and that change is for the good. It therefore adds to what God can then offer that one, releasing more of the divine resources toward the good that God can then use.

When I pray for this man's well-being, even though I am greatly separated from him in time and place, even though he is an acquaintance newly met rather than a longtime friend or family member, my praying for him joins me with him in God. This relational theology indicates that we become one with those for whom we pray within God's own being, for we meet in God. It is God who feels this man's condition; it is God who feels my own condition in my praying for him; it is God who weaves me into this man's welfare. It matters not that I have no experiential consciousness of this—nor should I, for it is within God's own self that this weaving happens. God feels the world as it is, unifying that world within God's own nature in order to offer good to the world individually in all its aspects. How the world is unified within God depends upon God's own feelings of each part of the world's relevance to all

other parts, and upon God's gracious ability to combine the world toward its good in and through God's own nature. Praying for another's well-being allows God to weave us into that other's well-being. In this manner we become part of those for whom we pray, and they become part of us.

All things relate to all other things. In this interdependent world, everything that exists experiences to some degree the effects of everything else. We are so constituted that very, very little of all this relationality makes it to our conscious awareness. But we are connected, nonetheless; it is sure. Praying lifts these loose connections to our conscious awareness in the context of God's presence. We begin to feel an echo of that divine meeting and weaving, no matter how distant the one for whom we pray. Through prayer, we can begin to experience the relationships that are otherwise too subliminal for us to notice. Intercessory prayer is a place of meeting, within God and to a far less intense degree, within the world.

There is another implication of this meeting in God when our prayers involve us in supportive intercession for the work of others, whether near or far. As a Christian church we have a mission to be channels of God's love in this world, acting toward the alleviation of misery both by working to change structures that contribute to misery, and by administering the "cup of cold water" in Christ's name. We are to do these deeds not silently, but as those who speak of the love we have received from God through Christ: we share our stories, ourselves, in our doing. The Christian gospel calls us to proclamation in word and deed.

The tasks within our mission are enormous, as enormous as the problems of the world. Where there is greed, exploitation, hatred, injustice, pain, misery, or hardship of any kind in this earth there is a call to Christian witness. And Christian witness is a “deeded” word, and a “worded” deed; proclamation is word and deed. Clearly there is more to do than can be done by any one person. But as Christians we are called to enter into God’s caring for the world. How can we do this, save through prayer?

While we prayerfully do the small task given to each of us, we can also enter into prayer for the mission of the church as a whole, and of its many members who, like us, are called to their own part of its mission. Instead of being limited to tasks that are in the range of our capabilities, prayer enables us to participate in the tasks of others, tasks which our own talents could never equip us to do. Then again, of course, there is no one who can do our own task in the same way that we can do it. Others, praying for us, participate in our work. Prayer then becomes the weaving together of all the various works involved in the mission of the church, making them one and us one, even in such great diversity. Prayer is the weaving of things, making us participants in one another’s work, strengthens to each other in our work, through the grace and power of God.

Were the God-world relation one where there were absolutely no limitations on God, then the universe would be a place where intercessory prayer would be absolutely unnecessary. But in a God-world relation of interdependence, where the world’s power must be taken into account, where God’s power is exercised in the form of possibilities that the

world has the power to reject, then intercessory prayer is of utmost importance. It's not just that *we* need to pray—it's that God needs us to do the praying. Our prayers actually make a difference to what God can do.

God works with the world as it is. Quite simply, prayer changes the “isness” of the world. A world where there is this specific praying going on is not the same as a world where this praying is not going on. And the God who is always working with the world takes every opportunity within the world to influence it for its own good. For this reason, I am convinced that it is God's own self who prompts us to pray, and that when God needs resources for any particular situation, God will give an impulse toward prayer to those open to such an impulse so that their praying may make a difference to what God can give in yet another place.

God's touch upon our lives often takes the form of a call to us to pray so that we ourselves become a new opening for God's power in the world. Consider the horrible human penchant to slaughter those whom we do not perceive to be of our own kind. We assume that God does not will the slaughter of people, and that since God receives from every element of the world, God, as well as the slaughtered, experiences the pain of the hatred and its killing power. What can God do against human intransigence? We have long since learned that God is not a Thor, hurling thunderbolts in indignant retaliation. God works against the world's resistance. But when we pray for the well-being of those involved in dreadful bloodshed, even when we do not personally know these peoples, do we not give the God who works contextually more to work with?

By our active caring, exercised through our prayers, have we not to some degree changed the context? Though we are at a distance, though we are relatively insignificant in the politics and hatreds of amassed power, though we have no control over foreign powers, yet we are not helpless. For God wills well-being and is a present force toward what forms of well-being are possible in any situation, even in the horror of military madness. When we pray we open ourselves to God's will toward well-being. The direct resistance toward well-being that God deals with in any strife is countered by our own openness toward that specific well-being. In a relational world, our caring directed toward others turns us into part of the context within which God works toward the other's good. Even though we are at a distance, our prayers change what is possible. For God is never at a distance.

A relational God, then, depends upon our prayers. But in a world of interdependence, we must recognize that God may use us in answer to our prayers. When we offer ourselves to God through prayers of intercession, whether for strangers we have never met in a distant country, for acquaintances, or for those we know more intimately, we do so realizing that God works through the world for the world. Through prayer, we open ourselves to conformity with God's great will. And if God touches us at every moment of our lives with directive energy, and if our will joins God's will in a care toward a particular personal or social situation for well-being, then there is no guarantee that God will not use us to bring about some aspect of that well-being. We risk being used by God as answers to our own prayers.

I experienced something of this some years ago when the movement against apartheid in South Africa was gaining momentum in America. I had prayed for justice and well-being in that country, of course, but never thought of any other mode of help. I had just moved to Washington, D.C., to become the dean at Wesley Theological Seminary, and I encountered an activist faculty. Scarcely a month had gone by since my arrival when the faculty voted to demonstrate at the South African embassy, even though this demonstration entailed civil disobedience. As the new dean, I felt bound to abide by the vote of the faculty, and to join the demonstration, but inwardly I was horrified. What? Get *arrested*? It filled me with terror, for it was the early days of these protests, and not yet apparent that those who demonstrated would not be sued, fined, and/or imprisoned. I moaned and groaned inwardly in my wimpish condition; I knew neither bravery nor courage as the appointed day came. Enhancing my shame at my cowardice was the knowledge that those for whom the demonstration was called faced not embarrassment, but torture and death. When they protested their deprivation of liberty and well-being, they received no courtesies. Compared to them, what did I or the faculty risk? For all this, I did not want to join the demonstration, and had it not been for the vote of the faculty, I would not have participated. I had no wish to defy the law.

But go I did, and to my horror it appeared that as dean, I was the leader. So I led the march, presented our petition at the embassy door, and stood with the others as we sang the songs of freedom. Because we ignored the warnings of the

police to leave, we were eventually arrested, handcuffed, and driven to the police station to be fingerprinted, and eventually—to my enormous relief—released because the embassy chose not to sue. And so I returned to my home at the seminary, grateful at having “done my duty” unscathed, and at the same time muttering that it was all useless symbolism. After all, what difference did it make that I in America had done this foolish thing that not only paled in the face of what persons actually experienced in South Africa, but almost made a mockery of their great sacrifices?

Five months later the letter came. As dean, I was the one to receive it. Tears flowed down my cheeks as I read the letter from a pastor in South Africa, thanking us at Wesley Theological Seminary for what we had done. He had read of our protest, he said, and shared it with his congregation, and he could not say what courage it had given them to know that we, too, stood with them. It gave them a new boldness in their efforts, he said, as he thanked us in the name of God. And I wept.

The easiness of our prayers for these unknown people had become the hardness of action, even though that action was indeed a very tiny and insignificant part of the full drama of South Africa. But by the grace of God, it *did* become a part of it. Our actions were but a drop when an ocean was needed, but we were called to be that “drop.” And we became part of a mighty ocean. These years later I see in wonder the ultimate fruit of all that has happened in that country of miracles. By the faithfulness of God, prayer has played a part in the empowerment of a people, the raising up of leaders, and some

degree of resolution in the struggle toward a more just government.

Be careful for what you pray, for God may use you in addressing those things for which you pray, even though you are at a distance. Prayer creates a channel in the world through which God can unleash God's will toward well-being. Prayer puts you in the way of the channel, and you will become a part of God's rolling waters.

It is relatively easy to enter into intercessory prayer for causes or persons that engage our care, but we are bidden by the teachings of Jesus Christ to pray not only for our friends, but for our enemies. This would also be easy if in fact we were always open and loving to those whom we have reason to consider our enemies, but the reality is that we often return the feelings of enmity. In cases where the perceived enemy is a different country or ethnic group, then we easily demonize the enemy so as to more "righteously" destroy in a "just" war. In cases of personal injury, our natural attitude is to hope that the other will suffer even as he or she has made us suffer. In other cases the injury has been violation of an innocent one, such as in child abuse, and our feelings toward the one who has so violated the dear child are rage and indignation. We do not wish this person's well-being! When we are victims of crimes, we tend most often to will the ill-being of the violators.

But we are called to pray for our enemies. How shall we enter into this mode of intercessory prayer, and why? Isn't it enough that God will deal with them according to God's own wisdom? Why must we be involved at all? Our preference, in

all charity, is to be far removed from that other, as if that other did not exist! We hardly notice or care that this is almost analogous to psychic murder.

There is a meeting in God that is heightened by earthly relevance, and whether we like it or not, the act of injury itself creates relevance. How we are makes a difference in how that other can be, and how the other is makes a difference in how we can be, for God works with the world as it is in order to lead it to where it can be. We are bidden to pray for the well-being of the offender and, in fact, the offender's well-being can increase the well-being of ourselves and those we love. Think of it! The injurer's well-being is also violated by the injury inflicted on others, for this is an impoverishment of his or her spiritual well-being. The injurer's well-being is transformation, and the transformation of the injurer bodes well for those who would yet be violated if there were no transformation. Ah, but we hate this one, and while we would begrudgingly admit transformation as well-being, we prefer they suffer as we have suffered first! How then do we obey the injunction to pray?

“Forgive us our trespasses, even as we forgive those who trespass against us.” To forgive is to will the well-being of the other, and to live accordingly. We must pray for the other's well-being, even through gritted teeth, in the honesty of our souls. Sometimes the prayer is as crude as “Oh God, I wish they would rot in hell, but I pray for their well-being anyway, and ask you to forgive my own evil wishes even though I prefer to keep on wishing them; God help us both. Amen.” There is seldom great release in such praying, since we are in

the grip of hatred. But my experience is that responding to my wishes for vengeance with a prayer for the other's well-being actually begins to release me from my own participation in hatred and transform me. God universally desires well-being, and God desires my enemy's well-being. Should I not be in conformity with God's own great will toward well-being?

There is an odd sense wherein to continue in hatred is to perpetuate the crime, to continue to make it present in our emotional lives. Sometimes this is occasioned by the permanent effects of the initial crime—a murder removes the dear one forever from our family table, an infidelity ruins a marriage, a theft can result in financial ruin. The crime itself ensures that it will effectively deprive us of future good. But to continue in hatred is to block the transforming power of God that can lead us even through this tragic condition. To pray for the well-being of the violator gives God more to work with not only in dealing transformatively with the violator, but also in our own healing. We are called to pray for the well-being of those who despitefully use us, and in the process our own will can be transformed to become a reflection of God's will. The prayer that begins begrudgingly can slowly become a willing prayer, till at last we know the release of being one with God in praying for the other's well-being.

In such prayers—and indeed in all prayers—it is best not to dictate to God precisely what the form of well-being can be. We must release the prayers to God, and let God fill in the blanks, for only God knows the fullness of the circumstances. In releasing these prayers we nonetheless remain open to any impulse toward our own actions, for prayers are living things,

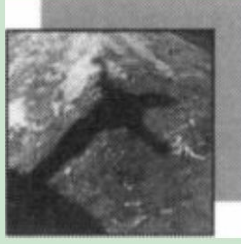
affecting our attitudes and actions in the world. But on the whole it is safest to leave the prayer with God, releasing not only the prayer, but ourselves to a new future.

There are as many modes of intercessory prayer as there are modes of caring in the world. Often our prayers of intercession do not involve situations of dire need at all, but merely the ongoing condition of love. We pray for our family, our friends, our communities, lifting them before God in love, wanting for them all the rich goodness of life. We live in the paradox of praying for their good and only their good, even while we know that to be human is to hurt—it is not possible and perhaps not even desirable that we should go through life knowing no harm. So our prayer for their good is not necessarily for their protection from all harm; this would be humanly impossible. We pray for a good that includes their openness to the transforming love of God that brings them always into resurrection life, no matter what pains they may experience. We pray for the well-being of those we love.

In praying for their well-being, we are sometimes specific, but more often not. In faith, we do not know enough to be specific, for the fullness of another's circumstance, even those we most deeply love, is more than we are capable of knowing. But God knows. Remembering that all language in prayer is translated into God's own knowing, words become particularly insignificant, and so we pray instead through images. We "see" the face of the other, holding it in our heart with a yearning for that person's well-being, offering this fullness to God as prayer. We visualize the one for whom we pray in our minds or hearts or wherever such visualizing takes place, and open

ourselves to God's will for that one's well-being.

Finally, it may not be our images alone any more than it is our words alone that constitute our prayers, but, rather, ourselves. The real prayer is the one who prays, the "prayer." In prayer we open ourselves to conformity with God's will toward well-being relative to a particular person, place, or time. God's will for that well-being is echoed or mirrored in our own will for that well-being, creating in the mirroring an image of God in us. Our whole being then becomes communion with God, so that we, the praying ones, become our prayers. In this communion, we offer ourselves for God's use in working the well-being we both ardently desire. And God will so use us, in ways not always given to our knowing.



CHAPTER FIVE

Prayers for Healing

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erhaps the intercessory prayers we offer more than any other—certainly in public settings—are prayers for those who are ill. What happens in this praying? How are we to understand situations where despite our deepest, most agonized prayers, the one for whom we pray dies? If prayer makes a difference, why doesn't it always make the difference of healing? And if prayer does indeed make a difference, does the death of the one for whom we have prayed mean that we simply did not pray enough—that if we had only given God more prayers to use for the well-being of this dear person, then the person would live? Is it our “fault” that he or she dies,

throughout neglect of prayer?

In working with these issues, I follow the fundamental dynamics already given. God works with the world as it is in order to lead it toward what it can be. Prayer changes the way the world is, and therefore changes what can be. The application of these dynamics to prayers for healing requires recognition that mortality is part of the way the world is, and that immortality within the conditions of history is not part of our possibilities in the world. Prayer can make a difference to recovery when in fact an illness is not a “sickness unto death,” or terminal, but prayer cannot eliminate our mortality. Each of us will encounter one disease or dysfunction that leads to our death.

Prayers for healing must take place in the full recognition of our mortality, since in one sense such prayers are a defiance of our mortality. We cry out that yes, we know quite well, thank you, that we are mortal, and that this loved one is mortal, but in *this* instance, Lord, override this mortality! Our own well-being is so interwoven with the well-being of this one that should he die, should she die, we would as well. Oh God, remove this unbearable mortality; let us live!

Over one hundred years ago there were many such godly prayers for healing. Not only all the persons for whom those prayers were made, but also all those who made them are now certainly dead. Do we say that God answered their prayers, God just said no? How superficial an answer! The fact is that the context for prayers of healing is our mortality. We will all die; it is not a question of if, but a question of when. The

wonder is that given our fragility, and all the illnesses we contract, all but one of these illnesses are reversible. But it is a given that sooner or later we will each encounter the “sickness unto death,” whether it comes through accident or through virus or through bacteria or simply through the fact that we will wear down, wear out, and die.

Too often prayers for healing are requested or offered as if the fact of our mortality were somehow a fable, or as if the norm of our mortality is that we should be in our nineties and die in our sleep. But how few people live to their nineties, or die quietly in the sleep of old age! The stark reality is that we encounter our mortality through all the spectrum of our years. In my own family, my grandfather died at 84, my father at 52, my mother at 70, my nephew at 25, my granddaughter but five-and-a-half months in the womb, and my son-in-law at 38. It is odd to think that somehow the norm, like the goal, is that we ought to die at 90 and in our sleep. Life and death are not so simply calculated.

So how and why do we pray for healing? Since we die anyhow, and it is simply a question of when, why not accept the reality and devote our prayers to other things? Would not God will it so? God wills the well-being of this world, even in the midst of its fragility and mortality, and not all illnesses need be terminal. Prayers for healing make a difference in what kinds of resources God can use as God faithfully touches us with impulses toward our good, given our condition. Those prayers can make the difference between reversing a not-yet-irreversible illness or not; therefore, God bids us to pray. But only God knows the point of that irreversibility, and

in some diseases, it is with the very onset. For we creatures are, despite our toughness, most fragile.

God knows when irreversibility in any disease actually sets in. Prior to irreversibility, prayers give God more to work with in influencing a person, body and soul, to fight a particular disease. Think of it: did God decide that my son-in-law Butch, with a wife and three young children, should die? Was it God who afflicted Butch with myelocytic leukemia? Or is it not rather the case that in this finite world of fragility and interdependence it's a wonder we live as long as some of us do? Our bodies interact with many influences, both genetic and environmental, and mortality is built into the system for all creaturehood. The complexity of our embodiedness that provides us with the capacity for conscious participation in life is a fragile complexity, subject to breakdown. I do not know what disposes one person and not another to leukemia, save that our vulnerabilities are variable. But I do know that God works with us as we are to lead us to where we can be, with a preferential option toward deeper and richer communities of well-being. Surely God, and not simply Cathy, their children, and all who loved Butch, cared for his continued participation in this life. But when a disease such as leukemia is irreversible—and only God knows when—then not even God can make the ill one live—in this life. Prayers for healing are offered since we do not know the state of any disease. If reversibility is still possible, God can use our prayers to bring healing about.

But what if irreversibility is the case, what then? Shall we stop our prayers for healing? Of course not, for healing comes

in many forms, and there is a health that is deeper than death. I saw it manifested in my own mother on her deathbed. We learned with a shock that my mother was dying. We flew to her, my brothers and I, from Costa Rica, San Francisco, Boston, and Pittsburgh. And when we arrived at the hospital in Dallas we were shocked when the elevator door opened at her floor, and we saw the dreaded word: *oncology*. We had been told only that something was wrong with her liver. Then we saw her swollen body, yellowed with the sickness that was indeed unto death. I prayed without ceasing during that hospital vigil, first pleading with God to save her, and then pleading with God to let her die swiftly to end her agony. In those first days of staying with my mother while the nurses bathed her, I noted the torn flesh on her poor belly where the adhesive had pulled away from the incision. The torn place was raw and oozing. And I prayed for her healing, and daily stayed by her as she was bathed, and to my mystification I watched that ugly sore heal. I confess it contributed to my anger: "God, you are healing this stupid sore, but it's not her sore that's the problem, it's her liver; why can't you do something about that?" But I learned that what forms of healing are possible are given, even in the sickness unto death. And her skin healed, while her urine turned black.

The forms of healing, I learned, are not only physical. At one point my mother, who had been in a semi-coma, roused herself and miraculously lifted her head and upper body from the bed, stretching out her arms toward us, her grown children. My brothers took her arms; I, at the foot of the bed, touched her feet. She looked at me and said a cryptic, "Do you want to

join me? It's affirming." At first I inwardly cringed—to join her in death! No! But in the instant I knew she was right. We *had* each joined her, through our deep love and our prayers that so united us with her, and it *was* affirming. We were touching the profound places of the human spirit in that hospital room, and discovering that the process of dying was holy. Then she looked at us all and said, "My heart is filled with overwhelming love." I knew then that my prayers were answered, and my mother died a healthy woman. There is a health that is deeper than death.

And so it was with Butch. He joined a prayer group of women at his church, meeting each Tuesday to lift the needs of the church and the world to God in prayer. He who was prayed for joined in prayers for others. And so it should be. Prayer is that great and strange work that is our continuous privilege and responsibility, regardless of our condition. In the process of joining with the women in prayer, Butch grew even more deeply into the heart of that small Christian community, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church in Dallas. The congregation itself, interacting in the drama of Butch's struggle for life, grew even more closely knit. I remember the Sunday when Cathy had gone to the hospital to bring Butch home again, to wait for the next crisis. I had taken the children to church, and was sitting in their usual front row, and the eucharist was just about to be offered. I heard a sound from the congregation and turned to see Butch and Cathy coming haltingly down the aisle, Butch on his crutches. The children and I joined them at the communion rail as they led the congregation in taking bread and wine together. God works with the world as it is to

lead it to where it can be, always—if we will follow—in the direction of deeper and richer modes of human community.

Butch died during the bone marrow transplant. A donor had been found, but too late. His weakened body could not survive the grueling process of the transplant. We softly sang the liturgy of the church he loved as he died—“surely, it is God who saves us; we will trust in God and not be afraid.” Again I learned the holiness of death, even while also drinking deeply of its pain and grief. It is not good that Butch died—but it is very good that Butch lived. There is no doubt that it would be better if he continued to live out his life, being father to his growing children and husband to my daughter, contributing to the richness of his family, his community, and therefore to this world.

But though this did not happen, God used the many prayers for Butch’s healing. They contributed to his buoyancy of spirit, to the endurance that he and Cathy and the children found in the strength of their own love, the love of their families, and the love of that little congregation daily poured out for them. Prayers for the terminally ill can work a health that is deeper than death. And underneath are the everlasting arms.

I learned in the months following Butch’s death that prayers for healing have a continuing effect. We all grieved with Cathy and the children, and for ourselves as well. And we continued in our prayers. On my visits to Dallas my growing grandchildren would throw themselves in my arms, covering me with hugs and kisses, and I would know that they were

healing: a child who can still love openly, having suffered great loss, is a healthy child. And I watched my dear daughter live through her grief, with its rage and despair and aching emptiness. I rejoiced when a new job opportunity came along and I saw her rise to meet its challenge; I thanked God as I saw her reach out toward relationships. And I began to learn that the prayers for healing that could not be answered with Butch's recovery are now being answered through the health of his young family. The healing of Cathy, Garth, Graham, and Kent is the healing of Butch as well. For they have been "joined with him" in his death through their participation in his suffering, and I believe that by the resurrection power of God Butch is joined with them as they heal and open their own hearts to love and life. Healing comes in many forms, one of which is in the ability of the survivors to embrace life lovingly once again.

If indeed God receives the world in every moment, then God receives us in every moment. We certainly have no consciousness of ourselves "in God," for our consciousness is always newly created, oriented toward our living. Would it be so strange to think that upon death, when there is no newly created consciousness in the continuation of our histories, we might experience ourselves in God as participants in God's own life? And if such could happen, would it not be the case that as God experiences the continuing events of the world, we who are held in the life of God would also experience the continuing stories of earth? If so, then Butch experiences the recovery of Cathy and the boys, and their healing literally becomes his healing as well. It would also follow that, since

God gives us guidance for each moment based upon who and where we are and also upon God's own resources, that Butch's life in God becomes part of the resources mediated to Cathy and the children as they pick up their lives again after Butch's death. God interacts faithfully with the world, giving to the world and receiving from the world, and death does not stop this interaction, it merely changes its form. There is a healing that is deeper than death.

These experiences of prayer in the context of terminal illness illustrate only one form of the effectiveness of prayers for healing. Prayers for healing, even when the illness in question is thought to be terminal, sometimes contribute to a reversal toward health for the one for whom we pray. In these happy cases, God can combine the divine resources with those of the person's own self and with the communities of personal and professional care surrounding the ill person. Recovery occurs, and those who prayed in agony pray in rejoicing gratitude for the renewed health of the one they love. God alone knows when such reversal is and is not possible in identified terminal cases. Thus, to give prayers for healing in the context of terminal illness is to pray for the health that is possible, whether that be total recovery, partial recovery, or the recovery of those who mourn. In releasing such prayers to God, we look for and rejoice in the forms of healing that can be and are given.

Because prayers for healing issue usually in recovery (for we survive all but one of our illnesses!) there is often the phenomenon of self-blame when in fact the illness of one we love issues into death. There seems to be some psychic

movement of dealing with grief that takes us through this dark passage. If in fact our prayers make a difference to what God can do, and if in fact the one for whom we pray dies, do we then have a right to blame ourselves, and to say that if only we had prayed harder, or longer, or earlier, or more fervently, or more constantly, or more whatever, God could have saved him, her?

The phenomenon of self-blame happens often, regardless of whether it focuses upon how or whether one prayed. Perhaps it is rooted in our very interdependence, so that at some level we know we contribute to one another, sustain one another, with our own energy. When one we have loved with our very being fails, have we contributed less than enough? And so the questions and blaming perhaps arise from our deep sense of interdependence. But this very interdependence means that we do not and cannot exercise full control in our own or another's life. Other forces than our own also interact interdependently, for our good or for our ill, and control is never total; it is always shared.

Prayer is a partnership with God, not a manipulation of God. Prayer is prompted by God, and released to God. It is not our business to second-guess after the fact what could or would have happened had we done thus or so. We might as well blame God for not prompting us more forcefully to prayer, for does not God give us a guiding impulse in every moment of our being? Perhaps we prayed less than we did because God knew the condition of irreversibility, and did not prompt us to pray for recovery. All that we truly know is that, being mortal, our loved one had a sickness unto death. We

release our prayers to God; we must release our loved one unto God as well. We are Christians, after all, and a people who live from and toward the God of resurrection power. God, not we, is the only one who really knows the might-have-beens of life.

The recourse to feelings of guilt and self-blame is prayer, naming before God all our feelings of failure and inadequacy in the honesty of who we are and how we are. Just as we are called to release our prayers of intercession to God, even so we are called to release our prayers of confession to God, and then to get on with it. We must trust this God unto whom we release our prayers, and look for the health that is deeper than death.

So, then, prayer that takes place in an interdependent world most surely involves prayers of intercession for healing, even for those who are terminally ill. Our praying makes a difference to what God can do. We offer our prayers for well-being, knowing that God will fill in the blanks of precisely what that well-being can be. And we know that there is no inadequacy in our praying, no matter how inadequate we might feel, for God's own self, through the Spirit, prompts our prayers, receives our prayers, and translates our prayers into the stuff for God's doing. And so we release our prayers to God to whom we give them, trusting this God who works with us all to do with them as God can and will.

In an interdependent, relational, contextual world, our praying constitutes a dance with God that makes a difference to what God can do in the world. For God works with the world as it is to lead it to what it can be. And prayer changes

the way the world is, and therefore changes what is yet possible in the world. We can never predict in detail what that transformation will be, but since it comes from God, in interaction with this world, we do know this—in this world, it will be toward a finite form of resurrection, in a transformation that the world can bear. And who knows what it will be in that great resurrection which is yet before us, our resurrection into God's own life?