

**“Prayer Cry”**  
**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost- October 21<sup>st</sup> 2012**  
CCUMC  
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**Human Prayer Cry**

Have you ever made a prayer-cry to God? Have you ever been in a place of deep darkness, and all you could do was plead with God as tears run down your face? Have you ever been in your own garden of Gethsemane-the garden of anguish where Christ went before his crucifixion? Have you ever made a prayer-cry to God?

I have a dear friend from my college days who prayer-cries to God every night. Her little son, Collin, is receiving treatment at Denver Children’s Hospital for a very challenging form of AML leukemia. This week, he is undergoing a particularly devastating round of chemotherapy. He cannot eat, he cannot sleep, he is in pain. My friend Suzanne stumbles back to the Ronald MacDonald House at night, exhausted and seven months pregnant. She told me, “Mel, at night—that’s when I cry. During the day I try to stay strong for Collin.” Alone and in her dark garden of Gethsemane, she makes her prayer cries to God. “O God, heal my child. O God, help my son to live! Lord, have mercy. Help him to live.”

Prayer-cries express excruciating honesty. In a prayer cry, our suffering is laid bare before God. In all our vulnerability and finitude we cry to the One who can heal for help. We are brutally honest with our pain.

Jesus understands how to make a prayer cry. Our text today says, “During his days on earth, Christ offered prayers and requests with loud cries and tears as his sacrifices to the one who was able to save him from death.” (verse 7) Commentators think that the author of Hebrews is thinking of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemene. Unlike in the gospel accounts of Gethsemene in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, here in Hebrews Jesus cries. Jesus has tears streaking down his face. Jesus cries out at the prospect of his own death. Jesus understands

suffering; he experiences the depths of human pain for himself. Jesus knows what it's like to make a desperate prayer-cry to God.

Jesus understands suffering because Jesus came among us as fully human. The book of Hebrews affirms over and over again (see chapter 2, 4:15) Jesus' sharing of the human condition. Jesus, though fully God, is also fully human. Jesus experiences life as we do. No depth of suffering exists that Jesus did not also experience.<sup>1</sup> Jesus can fully empathize with us in our prayer cries because Jesus shares with us our suffering and weakness.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is more than just our buddy, though, who knows what it's like to kneel in despair in our garden of Gethsemene. Jesus is also fully God's Son. Distinctively in the book of Hebrews, Jesus is our high priest, interceding on our behalf. In the Jewish tradition, which was important to the audience of Hebrews, priests in the line of Aaron represented God to the people. They made offerings and sacrifices for sins, and offered a pastoral ministry to the people. Out of an awareness of their own frailties and sufferings, Jewish priests were to deal gently with their people.<sup>3</sup>

The author of Hebrews uses this understanding of a Jewish priest in connection with Jesus Christ's work for us. Jesus as a high priest understands our frailties and sufferings—because he is one of us. He intercedes for us to God, making himself the sacrifice for our sake. Jesus as our high priest makes atonement for us, and grants to us mercy and grace from God. Jesus, as our high priest who knows how to make a prayer cry, takes all of our prayer cries, and lays them in the lap of God for us. Jesus in his own garden of Gethsemene says to God, “I'm home, and I have all my children with me. I'm bringing all their prayer cries to you, O God. Here is Suzanne's prayer cry for her cancer-ridden son. Here are

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, “Hebrews” *NIBC*

<sup>2</sup> Scott Shauf, “Hebrews 5:1-10” [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)

<sup>3</sup> Craddock, “Hebrews” *NIBC*

Wendy's and Hannah's for Carl. Here are Annie's prayer cries for her friend, here are Bob and Karen's for their friends, here are Ditty's for her daughter Ruthie, . . . here are all the prayer cries, God. We trust that you will hear them and bring grace and mercy. We trust this, because I obediently gave my life for them."

Jesus' ability to fully understand our prayer cries, to carry them to God through his own obedient suffering, is the gift of our Christian faith. The incarnation assures us that God understands and hears the depths of our prayer cries. The incarnation assures us that Jesus is the priest on our behalf, sacrificing himself for our sake. The incarnation assures us that our own suffering is caught up in the salvific power of a God who became one of us.

Christ's incarnation and complete identification with us in our own garden of Gethsemene can be difficult to grasp. In a story called "The Man and the Birds," religion editor Louis Cassels recounted the story of a man who refused to attend Christmas Eve service with his family. He didn't believe in the mystery of the incarnation. How, after all, could God really become one of us? How could God really understand our prayer cries, our human condition? This man stayed at home, and magically enough, it began to snow on Christmas Eve. The sound of someone throwing snowballs against the living room window jolted him out of his lonely thoughts. Going outside to investigate whomever the hooligans might be, he saw instead a flock of birds trying to fly through his window. The birds were frantically seeking refuge from the swirling storm. The man thought the birds might find shelter in his barn, and he walked there. He opened the barn doors and turned on the light, but the birds stayed outside. He created a trail of breadcrumbs for them to follow into the barn, but that didn't work. The little birds kept hurtling themselves headlong into their own window of destruction. He tried even to physically shoo them into the barn, but that effort also proved unsuccessful.

He thought to himself, “If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them away from the window and to safety.” At that very moment, the church bells began to ring. The man sank to his knees in the newly fallen snow. “Now I do understand,” he whispered. “Now I see why you had to become one of us.”<sup>4</sup> The incarnation was the only way you could lead us to safety. It’s the only way you could understand our suffering, our penchant for throwing ourselves against windows---and give us a way out.” The man lifted his hands up in the falling snow, tears running down his cold face, and made his first earnest prayer cry to God. Surely, Christ heard it—and kind, gentle high priest that he is—offered it to God.

Have you ever made a prayer-cry to God? Have you ever been in a place of deep darkness, and all you could do was plead with God as tears run down your face? Have you ever been in your own garden of Gethsemane? Trust that our high priest hears us, and fully understands your suffering. Trust that that same high priest, Christ, offers in return grace and mercy. Thanks be to Jesus Christ, the Incarnate One. Amen.

### **Prayer time**

We now have a space to offer our prayer cries to God. We will do two prayer practices to help us to do that. First, we will sing the Taize prayer chant, “O Lord, hear my prayer” We will sing this chant over and over again, until it becomes a prayer song of our heart, and we are no longer concerned about notes and our voice.

Secondly, we will practice the Jesus Prayer. Simply put, this is a mantra of the words “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” These words come from the prayer of blind Bartimaeus on the side of the road, pleading “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” The

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<sup>4</sup> Bryan J. Whitfield, “Hebrews 5:1-10” October 18, 2009 [workingpreacher.com](http://workingpreacher.com)

blind man cries out from the darkness of his existence, from his garden of Gethsemene, to the one who can hear and offer hope. From this ancient plea in the New Testament this simple prayer became heavily used among the Christians of the Eastern Orthodox church. In the late nineteenth century an unknown Russian penned the work know as the *Way of the Pilgrim*. In this manuscript a pilgrim yearns to learn how to pray without ceasing. He goes to see a Russian *starsi*, or spiritual elder, who tells him , “ The continuous interior prayer of Jesus is a constant uninterrupted calling upon the divine name of Jesus with the lips, in the spirit, in the heart. . . imploring his grace. The appeal is couched in these terms, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”<sup>5</sup> This prayer is hard at first for the pilgrim—he can’t concentrate. But as time goes on, the prayer becomes more and more a part of his thoughts and life—until he experiences the transforming power of God.

By focusing our minds on a single point—the repetition of the phrase—our own preoccupations begin to fade. Our concentration, by the grace of God, can propel us out of our own sorrows and into the peace and love of God.<sup>6</sup> Our prayer cry is heard by one who was in every way like us, and who carries our prayers right into the very lap of God.

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<sup>5</sup> *Way of a Pilgrim*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Wolpert, *Creating a Life with God*, 57