

Prayer Bridge



A two-week daily personal devotional designed to carry us from *Who is My Neighbor?* to *Partners in Transformation* through prayer and reflection

Welcome to Prayer Bridge! First of all, congratulations on delving into six meaningful weeks of self-discovery and congregational discovery through the series “Who Is My Neighbor?” Congratulations also on the hard work of inviting those neighbors to join you in your upcoming series, “Partners In Transformation”!

This devotional is designed to carry the fire you sparked during “Who Is My Neighbor?” during the two weeks before “Partners In Transformation.”

Each of the following days offers an abridged parable from Peter Rollins’ book *The Orthodox Heretic* (Paraclete Press, 2009), followed by a question for meditation and prayer as you prepare to be a great host and a great guest during the upcoming three sessions with members of the community and members of the congregation. Each parable will be followed by the title of that particular title in case you are interested in reading it in full.

The idea of this little prayer and parable book is two-fold: (1) it is a way to remain connected to the group with whom you’ve journeyed through “Who Is My Neighbor?” during the period you’re not meeting by praying together while apart, and (2) it is a way to open your heart to the group with whom you’ll journey through “Partners In Transformation.” We hope it is a helpful way to remain connected to what has been and what is to come, as well as remaining spiritually connected to your brothers and sisters in the congregation.

Day 1

There was once an old man named Benoni who lost his wife and children during a time of war. Some days he barely had the strength to carry on. But there was one who had drawn alongside him in his sorrow, the village blacksmith. When Benoni lost his first child, the blacksmith said, "I am so sorry that you have suffered this grave misfortune. If you will allow me, I would like to stand with you at this time of hardship." Ever since this first encounter the blacksmith had called round to Benoni's house most evenings.

One day when Benoni was particularly depressed he went to visit a pastor who listened and then, after a little thought, replied, "Well my son, in order for great fortune to take place one must first suffer great misfortune. The suffering you have faced is the price that has had to be extracted for strength of character, and a spirit forged in the fires of hell." Benoni returned home alone. *Perhaps he is right*, thought Benoni, *maybe I should take some comfort from these words. But it is cold, I am alone, and words can offer no shoulder to rest on.*"

Just then the blacksmith knocked on the door. Benoni shared the words of the pastor with his friend, adding, "Perhaps now that I have been given these words to comfort me, you no longer need to visit as you have done this last year." The blacksmith simply looked at the floor for a few moments and then replied, "My dear friend, if what the elder has said is true then I am needed all the more, for if you had to suffer such great misfortune in order to find strength of character and wealth of spirit, then this is in itself a great misfortune." And so they sat late into the night bringing comfort and warmth to each other through the sharing of their lives.

"Great Misfortune"

What does it feel like to comfort someone whom the church has made to feel a little more lonely? How has it felt in your life when someone showed up to comfort rather than instruct? How has it felt when you offered your company to someone in need, rather than your wisdom?

Take a moment to pray for people who need comfort today, who may not seek it because they are afraid of getting educated or judged or made to feel wrong for

being sad in the first place.

Day 2

There was once a young man with an unquenchable hunger for possessions. He worked hard, rarely saw his children and had a very short fuse. But more than this, he knew his lifestyle met with his father's disapproval. His father had also been a wealthy young man but soon realized how unsatisfying materialism could be. He lived a simple life, favoring fellowship and meditation over possessions. The young man's father had warned him of the perils of a shallow life and sought to teach him better values. The young man saw how beloved and at peace his father was and sometimes hated his own chosen path, but he continued on it.

His father may have been content, but he was also unhappy about his son's life and always offered suggestions and even criticism whenever they were together. One day, though, as the father was thinking about his son's life, he heard God say, "Your son is also my son, and I love him just as he is." The father immediately realized his mistake and tearfully apologized to his son for judging him so harshly for so many years. "Please never feel you have to change what you do or who you are," he said. "I love you without condition." He began to take an interest in his son's life and work and to ask questions about it. But his son found himself losing interest in his life of material possessions, eventually giving it all up and following in his father's footsteps, finally able to be who he truly was because his father had accepted him unconditionally.

"The Father's Approval"

Who in your life has offered to love you without judging you? Is that the relationship you have with God? Who do you know who needs love more than judgment, even if their life does not look like you wish it did?

Pray for people whose lives cause them pain; pray that they may know a God who loves them exactly as they are so the door might be opened to relieving their pain. Pray also that you may always experience God as a God who loves more than

judges, so that you may also experience relief from pain.

Day 3

A group of Disciples once heard Jesus say, “The law requires you to carry a person’s pack for one mile, but I say carry it two.” Romans soldiers often forced Israelis to carry their packs, and the Disciples loved the idea of turning a form of oppression into a way of living God’s values. They embraced this practice and began to get a reputation—Roman soldiers often hoped to bump into these particular followers of Jesus, and a bond sometimes formed during the carrying of the packs for such a distance. Soon, this behavior became a defining characteristic of the community, so they earned the nickname “Two-milers.” Leaders would speak of Jesus and the need to carry a Roman soldier’s pack for two miles in order to adhere to his teachings. Jesus heard about them and visited them on his way to Jerusalem. They gathered in joyful anticipation at meeting the man who had shaped and defined their small band of followers.

“Dear brothers and sisters,” he said, “you are faithful and honest, but I have come to you with a second message, for you failed to understand my first. Your law says you must carry a pack for two miles. My law says, ‘Carry it for three.’”

“The Third Mile”

How do we avoid taking powerful teachings and turning them into categorical rules, rather than overall ways of being and ways of seeing ourselves in the world?

Pray for the ability to grow in your efforts to live as Christ lived rather than follow the rules we’re taught.

Day 4

There was once a young woman who heard the voice of God tell her to translate and share the Good News. Printing presses were brand new, and the bible was only available in Latin, so she knew it would be very expensive to buy a press, hire a translator, rent space, buy paper and then distribute the bible in a language people could read, but God's voice was very clear. So she worked hard and earned almost enough money—when a huge earthquake destroyed the city where she stayed. She used the money to help the people in the decimated city, and when the money was gone and people were again beginning to thrive, she moved to another town and began to earn money to translate and share the good news—when a horrible plague swept this new town. She used all her money on medicine and comfort for the sick people of the village, and again moved on in her old age to raise the money—successfully this time—to rent space, buy a printing press, hire a translator, and distribute thousands of copies of the bible before she died. It is said of her that she translated and shared the good news not ONE but THREE times, the first two being more true translations than the third.

“Translating the Word (Adapted from a Buddhist Parable)”

How do the people you admire most practice their faith? How do those practices affect people around them?

Pray that God would help you share the good news of God's love through every action, even when God's name never comes up.

Day 5

The last person ever sentenced to death was a young man accused of distorting the image of God by his false teachings.

He was imprisoned and tortured to extract a confession. While he admitted his wrongdoing, he would not offer repentance. The condemned man was brought before the court to hear his sentence. The judge listened to the testimonies and announced these teachings could easily lead to conflict and disagreement with the one true church. Thus the heretic must suffer death by fire in order that he might repent before passing to the other side and so escape the eternal flames of hell. This would also silence the false doctrine he was teaching. The heretic had no final words at sentencing except the following: “The charges made against me are quite true, and I do not plead for my life. But if it would please the court, on the day of my execution I would like to choose from among the gathered crowd the one who would light the fires upon which to die.”

The judge thought this fair, since a common man would put him to death, after common people were whom he had led astray.

On the day of the execution, the judge honored his word. The young heretic’s eyes darted through the gathered crowd from his place tied to the stake, and people began to look down in discomfort. Eventually the whole marketplace went silent. “I stand before you now, helpless as a child, condemned to death for heresy,” the man said to the silent crowd. “I am guilty as charged, for I have held a distorted, muddied, and inaccurate view of the divine. I have only one request: that I be set alight by one among you who is innocent of this charge.”

“The Heretic”

Do we ever point out the speck in another’s eye while ignoring the log in our own? Do we ever cast stones without looking at our own sins?

Pray to God for the ability to engage others with humility.

Day 6

One night, to comfort his hard-working Disciples, Jesus began to tell stories of heaven. He wove stories for them of streets of gold and mansions within mansions, talking late into the night, and they fell asleep dreaming of that next world and all its opulence, until only one old, uneducated disciple sat awake with Jesus, staring into the embers in reflection with his teacher.

“I was wondering about something,” he finally said.

“Yes, my friend,” Jesus replied.

“There are so many people who follow you now—I worry I might get overlooked, as unimportant as I am. I’ve never been in a mansion, or even seen one, so it’s okay if I miss out on that in heaven. But will there be enough room for me in this kingdom of which you speak when I die?”

Jesus smiled with compassion, whispering, “Don’t worry. Tucked away in a tiny corner of heaven, away from all the grand mansions and streets of gold, there is a tiny cramped stable. It doesn’t look like much, but on a clear night you can see the stars amidst the cracks and feel warm breezes on your skin. That is where I live, and you are welcome to live there with me.”

“Mansions”

Where does God live in the next world? Where is God right now in this world?

Pray for God to be made known to you, and to guide you to the places where God is living now.

Day 7

One day Jesus was teaching, and the crowds gathered and listened to him. By the end of the day, they were very hungry, and the crowd was large, and all the Disciples could find were 5 loaves and 2 fish. Jesus sent his disciples out to gather all of the food that anyone had to sustain them in their travels, and the result was a huge pile of food in front of Jesus. He blessed the food, and he and his Disciples ate like kings in front of the hungry crowd. Miraculously, when they were finished, there was not even a crumb left that would feed one hungry person.

“Jesus and the 5,000 (a first-world translation)”

What would your community look like if Christians lived by this type of lifestyle of greed instead of the lifestyle Jesus modeled by taking a small amount and turning it into a feast for thousands of hungry people? How is that different from how your community looks now?

Pray a prayer of gratitude that Jesus shows us to live lives of generosity, and offer a prayer of thanks for the people you know who embody that value instead of the values in today's parable.

Day 8

After Jesus had descended from the mount of Olives he came across a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he cannot see?”

“Neither,” Jesus answered, “but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

Having said these things, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud and said to him, “My friend, go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” So the man went and washed and returned in jubilation, shouting, “I can see, I can see!”

The neighbors grumbled, debating, “Is he crazy?” “He was born blind,” “No, it is one like him.” He kept repeating, “I am the same man. Jesus anointed my eyes and said, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ I washed and now I can see everything.” The Pharisees said, “Jesus is a sinner.” “Sinner or not,” said the man, “I do not know. I do know, I was blind, now I see.”

The Pharisees began to laugh. “Old man, meeting Jesus has caused you to lose your mind. You had to be carried into this room by friends, you still stumble and fall like a fool. You are as blind today as the day you were born.”

“That may be true,” replied the old man with a long, deep smile, “as I have told you before. All I know is that yesterday I was blind, but today, today I can see.”

“A Miracle Without Miracle”

When did you last experience God’s work in the world in a way others might not recognize it? What has God helped you see more clearly in your own life?

Pray for the ability to receive God’s blessing of seeing clearly.

Day 9

In a world where following Christ is decreed to be a subversive and illegal activity you have been accused of being a believer. The prosecution presents the court with dozens of photographs which show you attending church meetings. They present religious books that you own, worship CDs and other Christian artefacts, journal entries that you had written concerning your faith and your well-worn bible that you had read and re-read this sacred text many times. You know deep in your heart that you face the possibility of a long imprisonment or even execution. You know you risk prison or death, but you stay strong. The judge stands before you, looks deep into your eyes and begins to speak, "I find the accused not guilty."

"Not guilty?" your heart freezes. Then, in a split second, the fear and terror that had threatened to strip your resolve are swallowed up by confusion and rage.

"But what about the services I spoke at, the times I wept in church and the long, sleepless nights of prayer?"

"It is obvious that you deluded those around you, and perhaps even deluded yourself, but this foolishness is not enough to convict you in a court of law."

"But this is madness!" you shout. "No evidence would convince you!"

"Not so," replies the judge as if informing you of a great, long forgotten secret.

"The court is indifferent toward your Bible reading and church attendance; it has no concern for worship with words and a pen. We exist only for those who would lay down that brush, and their life, in a Christ-like endeavor to create it. So, until you live as Christ and his followers, until you challenge this system and become a thorn in our side, until you die to yourself and offer your body to the flames, until then my friend, you are no enemy of ours."

"No Conviction"

What evidence exists that your Christianity demands that the existing culture change?

Pray for God's guidance in living a life of faith that challenges existing systems.

Day 10

Two brothers embraced faith early in life. One brother took it so seriously that he gave up everything in order to serve God—eventually he sold all his possessions in order to do God’s work in the world. Unfortunately, because he had so little money and lived in such poverty himself, he lost his one true love. Because of his poverty, he was often sick, and eventually he died alone.

His brother was never as serious about his faith and drifted from it more over time. He settled into married life with a woman he loved, had many children and lived in a beautiful home. With the increase in his contentment, his conversations with God dwindled to none. He paid little heed to those who suffered around him. After a long, happy life, he died in the arms of a loving wife surrounded by all his children.

In heaven, God called the two brothers before him, embraced them both warmly and gave them equal shares of the kingdom. The deeply faithful brother was obviously surprised....but it was a surprise of joy. “Today my joy is finally complete, for we are together again. Let us break bread together!” In response, his brother said nothing, but began to weep over the wasted life that he had led.

“The Reward of a Good Life”

What does grace look like for people who are not interested in helping others? How do we help them recognize the gifts we receive through our generosity without making them feel judged?

Pray that God will help you show grace to someone who doesn’t seem like they need it.

Day 11

The emperor had an unquenchable hunger for power, constantly strengthening his army and oppressing his land with demands for absolute obedience. In a dream, he saw his army laid to waste, and a voice said “There is a heavenly power at work in your empire that can bring your whole army to its knees, a power that transcends your earthly reign.” The emperor awoke determined to see such divine power for himself.

He visited every cathedral, following their rituals, offering sacrifices to any and all gods, learning every incantation. He practiced meditation, fasting, and prayer, all with no success. Then he heard of a great mystic who could uproot trees with a mere gesture. The mystic had contracted a fatal disease while working in a poor neighborhood and had only days to live. He gathered his entourage and rushed to the man’s bedside. “You are said to walk close to your God; I am here to witness this God’s power,” he said to the mystic.

“My God’s power is unlike anything you have encountered,” the mystic warned.

When the Emperor expressed his openness, the mystic beckoned the emperor to his bedside with the last of his strength. He whispered, “Here is the power of my God: it is to be found in my rotting flesh, my weakness, the dirt and disease of this world. You have not seen this power because it is in the people you have refused to heed: those you tortured and made suffer; the illegal alien, the widow, the orphan, the starving man. This weakness and fragility is the power of God, a power that can overturn the most evil of tyrants.”

These were the last words of the teacher, who died in the emperor’s arms. He looked around the humble dwelling at the poverty of the people who had stayed by this man’s bedside, and the emperor began to weep.

“Overthrowing the Emperor”

How have you seen God’s power, and how was it different from world leaders’ power?

Pray for access to God’s power through more access to God’s powerful people.

Day 12

A kindly old priest cared for an old church in an old city, generously welcoming and sharing all he had with all who came, showing no prejudice or restraint. Each stranger was, to the priest, the incoming of Christ. His hospitality was famous and his heart was known to be pure. It was impossible to steal from him since he did not think of possessions as his own.

One night there came a loud, ominous knock at the door, and the priest opened the door to find a demon towering over him with large dead eyes and rotting flesh. "Old man," the demon hissed, "I have traveled many miles to seek your shelter. Will you welcome me in?"

Without hesitation the priest welcomed him into the sanctuary, where the demon proceeded to tear down icons and rip the linens, screaming blasphemies and curses. The priest knelt silently and prayed. Then he got up to go to bed at home. "May I come with you?" spat the demon. "I too am tired."

"Of course," replied the priest. "Come and I will prepare you a meal."

At home, the priest cooked while the demon broke more objects and mocked the priest. He then ate the meal provided and said, "Old man, you welcomed me into your church and into your house. I have one more request: will you now welcome me into your heart?"

"Of course," said the priest. "What I have is yours and what I am is yours."

The demon was brought to a standstill, because by giving everything, the priest had retained the very thing the demon sought to rob him of: his kindness and hospitality, love and compassion. The demon left in defeat. And the priest? He drifted off to sleep, wondering what guise his Christ would take next.

"Salvation for a demon"

Does Jesus really want us to risk so much to be hospitable? What might happen if we treated terrifying people with gentleness?

Pray that God give you strength to welcome all people as you welcome Christ.

Day 13

There was a wise priest who worked tirelessly for the poor in an empire ruled by an elderly king. The priest was constantly approached by people in need. The king's son hated the church and its hypocrisy and deception. The prince would often oversee the imprisonment of church leaders and disrupt church gatherings. He particularly resented the respect given the priest, not him.

"Why should the people be so deceived by the old fool? He is like so many of his type: a coldhearted liar who sells the people his lies in order to live."

He carefully devised a plan to expose this hypocrisy by tempting the priest.

Late one evening, he visited the priest alone and said "I have the power to reach every person in this kingdom. For 10,000 rupees, would you write a letter to reach the whole kingdom informing people you are nothing but a liar and a hypocrite?"

The priest thought carefully before responding, "I will, under three conditions. One, if I do this, you must leave me and my church alone."

"Yes," said the prince.

"Two, you must release those brothers and sisters of mine who are innocent of any crime."

"Done," said the prince. "And the third stipulation?"

"Well," said the priest, "10,000 rupees is a great deal of money, and I am but a poor man. You will have to give me time to raise it."

"The Payoff"

Which is more important to us? How we are perceived, or our ministry?

Pray that God will help you detach your reputation from your worth as you partner with others in the coming weeks.

Day 14

An island nation was attacked by a dictator, and they decided they needed to fight back. Before going to battle, they consulted their oracle, and after a day of meditating, she reported that God had chosen the side of the dictator and that their army would demolish the people of this poor island. They were devastated and did not know what to do, but their leader said, "We will fight anyhow, for what is right." Their navy was outnumbered 3,000 to 15,000, and it was a bloody battle, but the island nation finally terrified the dictator's army into fleeing in defeat. When they return to the stunned appreciation of their people, the oracle asked, "How could you possibly have known you would win when God was on the other side?" The leader laughed and said, "Surely you know it doesn't matter which side God is on. When God is involved, the oppressed always triumph."

"God Joins the Army"

How do we recognize which people are on God's side? Who are the oppressed in your community?

Pray to join with the oppressed so that you can be in the mix with God.