

## Available to God on Behalf of Others

Ruth Haley Barton

*“On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.”* Psalm 138:3

This week I went to a funeral with my daughter, Haley. It was the funeral for one of her friends who died in a complicated way from causes that were not entirely clear. An Eagle Scout, a disciplined athlete, an excellent student, and an adored youngest brother of four with an impossibly contagious smile, he was just finishing up his freshman year of college. He died the week before final exams.

As Haley and I drove to the funeral, it was very quiet in the car. We had run out of words with which to talk about the horror of this situation. Of course, I was thinking about the family who had lost such a bright light in their lives. How would they go on in the face of such loss? How would they ever experience life as anything but incomplete—shot through with an immense emptiness—now that their beautiful boy was no longer with them?

I was also aware of Haley and the other young people who were affected by this loss and the unanswered questions contained within it. How were they to make sense of the fact that this delightful boy with whom they had grown up, gone to Boy Scouts, run track, attended youth group, studied, gone on dates...was no longer with them and for reasons they did not fully understand? I was unspeakably grateful to have my own bright-spirited nineteen year old right next to me in the car and unspeakably burdened that she and her friends would find some sort of path through this dark wood of loss and pain.

But I was also thinking about something else as we drove silently to this unbearable occasion. I was thinking about the pastor who would be presiding over the

service. What prepares a person to guide others through a moment such as this, I wondered? Does seminary do that? Does a homiletics class do that? A psychology class? Would he know what to say—really—beyond canned liturgies and one-size-fits-all funeral meditations?

I wondered if he would know how to provide true spiritual guidance to the standing-room-only crowd that gathered, each person carrying with them their gut-wrenching grief and confusion and unanswered questions? Did he feel the terrible weight of expectation as people made their way into the sanctuary—some weeping already, others numb with shock, grown men in suits with red-rimmed eyes clutching twisted handkerchiefs, mothers clinging to the arms of their teenage sons who were friends of the young man in the casket—all hoping against hope that this service would offer some comfort or peace or hope or insight?

As this pastor stepped into the pulpit and looked out onto that sea of upturned faces, did he see what Jesus saw on that day when he fed the five thousand—so many sheep in need of a shepherd? How was any one person supposed to carry the burden of knowing that, while this was one of his “routine” responsibilities as a pastor, this hour was one of the most important hours that this family and these friends would ever spend together? It was an hour that needed to make a difference in the deepest possible way.

### **Available to God on Behalf of Others**

As I entered the doors of the sanctuary and waited for the service to begin, I prayed for him and I prayed for you—all the pastors that I know and love and for whom the Transforming Center exists. I prayed because I know that this kind of scenario is

repeated over and over again in pastoral ministry, and on some days it doesn't even seem fair. It is not fair that such a burden of expectation could be heaped onto one office, and onto the person who fills that office.

Who is prepared—really—to preside over moments when a family's life has just caved in and they are being carried away by a rushing river of grief? Who is prepared to try and make some sense out of things that just don't make any sense, simply because that's your job? Who has the strength to hold a space big enough and safe enough to contain the darkest of human loss and emotion? Who has the spiritual presence to help people affirm their faith during times when faith seems so improbable? Who has the wisdom to open Scripture in such a way that people find some shred of meaning in what's happening to them, rather than putting a Biblical band aid on a gushing wound? Who has had enough experience walking with God through their own grief that they are able to hold out a light in the darkness with any credibility at all?

Surely the calling to *this* kind of presence in the world is beyond any of us and yet it is our calling.

And so I prayed for you—those whom I know by face and name and those that I only know by heart. I prayed that you would be able to live faithfully in that great paradox of spiritual leadership: that your ministry is all about you (because you are the one God has called to be where you are in this moment) and it is not about you at all (because it is all about God's work in and through you and *your ability to be given over to God* in whatever moment you are in). I prayed that we would all know that *this kind of availability to God on behalf of others* is not something we can put on like a uniform the day the call comes for us to do that thing we don't feel prepared to do—like preside at the

funeral of a young man who should have been taking final exams with all the other freshmen. On some days, this kind of availability is the willingness to lay our lives down as a bridge between the hardest of human experiences and Divine reality. Even if those to whom we minister are not quite ready to walk across that bridge, our very presence marks out a path that they might some day take.

### **A State of On-Going Preparedness**

This kind of leadership is what Henri Nouwen calls “living in a state of ongoing preparedness.” He says, “the question is not to prepare but to live in a state of ongoing preparedness so that when someone who is drowning in the world comes to your world, you are ready...”<sup>1</sup> This kind of preparedness comes from a life lived in deep and honest response to the presence of God in the midst of our own human experience, day in and day out. It comes from strength of soul—from maintaining an iron-clad connection to the One who is our Life and our Wisdom and our Strength.

The Psalmist says, “*On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.*” (Psalm 138:3) I have lived with this verse for a long time and it occurs to me that it is one of the best prayers a leader can pray—that God would increase our strength of soul. Surely this is a prayer that we can pray with confidence, knowing it is a prayer God longs to answer. So on the day of this funeral, I called out to God for you and for myself and for all of us who end up being with people at the crossroads of their lives, wondering how we got there. I prayed that God would increase our strength of soul to do the very thing we think we cannot do—that thing that nothing but the grace of God

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<sup>1</sup> From “Time Enough to Minister” by Henri J.M. Nouwen in *Leadership* (Spring, 1982)

could have prepared us to do. For the glory of God. For the abundance of our own lives in God's presence. And for the sake of those he has called us to serve.

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