

32963 Faith Column, 3-29-11
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And the Walls Come Tumbling Down

We've recently enjoyed reading a collection of prayers offered by children. Their prayers' directness and candor is both refreshing and inspiring. Children pray as if they look forward to an answer or a response from God. They pray as if they are a part of a mutually accountable relationship with God. They expect results.

Do we have the same expectation about the practice of prayer? Many of us seem to offer such tepid and timid prayers that it's clear we don't really expect to accomplish much by the process. Prayer, for many of us, if we engage in it at all, has become a rather staid ritual. It's as if we've lost confidence in the whole experience. Perhaps we need to rethink our expectations. Perhaps we could reclaim some of the confidence that children have in the efficacy of prayer by watching for the ways it changes lives and our even our world.

When we think of an occasion where prayer was instrumental in accomplishing monumental change, we think of the collapse of the Berlin Wall. While several alternate theories have been advanced to explain the collapse, here's how we see it.

The crumbling of that great wall started in the early 1980's, years before the wall finally came down. You see, St. Nicholas Church of Leipzig, East Germany had begun a prayer service for peace which met every Monday evening. The original prayer group was quite small. But every week the group gathered, Monday after Monday after Monday, and each week a few more came.

By 1989 attendance was so high that East German officials began to worry. They posted roadblocks and detained people, trying to prevent them from going to the services. They took pictures and wrote down names, promising prosecution. But nothing stopped the crowds. Finally the secret police made a move. They spread the word that they were prepared to shoot and kill anyone who came to the prayer service at St. Nicholas church the next Monday night.

When Monday evening came, the secret police were unprepared for what they saw. Two thousand people had packed the church and seventy thousand more clustered around the exterior of the church. Slowly, the entire

crowd began a quiet walk toward City Hall, where the armed guards were waiting for them. But the troops never opened fire. They simply watched as the marchers placed their candles on the steps of City Hall, clasped their hands together, and stood in a silent, prayerful vigil for peace.

Reportedly, the commander of the secret police was heard to mutter: “We planned for everything: rocks, bottles, glass – but we never planned for a crowd with candles and prayers.”

A seismic shift had occurred, shaking old certainties and sweeping away long established patterns. Within a month, the Berlin wall came down.

What if we prayed as determinedly as the citizens of East Berlin? Might we shake things up enough to see walls in our lives come down – walls of anger, bitterness, blame, hurt, guilt, greed, or indifference?

The results of prayer may not be instantaneous, but the long sweep of history of faithful people demonstrates again and again that prayer changes things – ourselves, others, and even our world. So we hope you will keep praying – and then wait for those walls to come tumbling down.