

Prayer Pumpkins - A Talk at Service on October 18, 2020 by Lori Hawkins

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Some days it's hard for me to think about the last 24 months or so. I have gone from being an 18-month plan-ahead kind of person to a taking-it-one-day-at-a-time kind of person. In the last 24 months my family has gone through a major hurricane which included damage to our home. At the exact same time, my parents were traveling in Europe and my mother ended up in a German hospital for over 2 weeks with pneumonia—they don't speak German. Our kids were out of school for 5 weeks due to Hurricane Florence. Those hurricane repairs took ALL of 2019, and even into the winter of 2020. And, no kidding, I sighed with some relief at the end of February this year thinking, this will be a much less stressful year.

And here we are, three months from the close of a year I don't even know how to describe. A couple of weeks ago I decided we would make the best of the upcoming holidays. I wasn't really sure how or what they would look like, except they would be different. It didn't dawn on me that my kids already knew.

My daughter was with me at the grocery store last week and she spied a big bin of pumpkins. Excitedly, she said, "Can I pick out my prayer pumpkin?" Me, astonished, said "Yes, of course." And so she chose one. When I asked her about it, because it wouldn't have been the one I picked, she said "It is the perfect prayer pumpkin! It's not one people would want for a decoration or carving, but it still needs a life." So in the cart it went.

Cruising through Pinterest in the fall of 2016, I came across a pin about Thanksgiving pumpkins. We already have a thankful tradition for November, but I wondered how we could use this idea to experience our faith in another way. I decided this idea could be used as an opportunity to practice intercessory prayer. Who did we know or encounter that might need our extra prayers? Throughout the month of October each night we talk about who needs those extra prayers or love. Our prayers have come to include all God's creatures and places. Each day we write another one on the pumpkin, praying for each of the ones before. Both of my kids have their own pumpkin with their own list.

Over the course of the last four Octobers, we have prayed for many, many school friends. We have often held up those in my kids' classes who seem to have a harder time. Looking back at the pictures of our pumpkins from 2017, a name right at the top of one stood out to me. A student in my son's class that year struggled, every day, and often went to the principal's office. One night, when her name was added to the list again, it led me to ask, "Do you feel like you have a safe place to live? Enough food to eat? People around you who love you?" Yes, yes, and yes, my kids answered. I don't tend to sugarcoat real life, and said something along the lines of "We all struggle with one thing or another, but some struggles are more challenging than others. There are kids you go to school with every day who don't feel safe at home, who don't have enough food to eat, and who don't feel loved.

And that is hard. Imagine how that might feel and how that might make you act. Just remember, there is more than meets the eye with every person you know."

We also pray for friends with cancer and a friend whose dad died suddenly. We pray for new babies and loved ones we've lost as we remember their birthdays. Our prayer pumpkins provide space for our family to talk about some hard subjects and share memories, for that I am grateful. I am also grateful this practice has helped my kids grow their empathy for others. This year we are working on how prayer calls us to action, that often God's response to prayers comes through us.

2020 is $\frac{3}{4}$ the way over. My best guess is it hasn't gone the way anyone planned. It has been difficult and challenging in ways I never thought possible. As our family rolls into October with our pumpkins and sharpies ready, I am unsure where the Holy Spirit will lead. We are ready to follow, knowing how many people are in need of God's love and extra prayers this year. My hope for our family is this simple prayer practice will help us and others keep walking, no matter what lies on the path ahead.