

Recently I took our staff out for Christmas to hear a concert by the Kansas City Symphony. The new conductor is Michael Stern; he's the son of Isaac Stern, a world famous violinist. Concerts often include a piece that features one solo musician. That night the soloist was a teenage girl who played the piano. She was amazing. After the concert, Michael Stern gave the audience a preview of next season, which will include two concerts featuring solos by the world famous cellist, Yo-Yo Ma.

The symphony staff members say when they hired Stern last year, they didn't realize the connections he had, and the way he could draw famous musicians to Kansas City. If you can get the right person to ask, you can often get favors that you want.

Even children know this. They learn who should ask which parent for a special treat, or which student should ask the teacher for a special permission. If a child has become trustworthy, adults will probably grant the favor. It takes more than just asking the question. You have to be the kind of person who gets a favorable response. You have to live every day in a way that makes you pleasing to those you wish to influence.

This is the struggle of today's responsorial psalm, "Lord, heal my soul, for I have sinned against you." The one who wrote this prayer was recovering from a sickness, just like the person we met in last week's psalm. That sick person believed you can get better if you confess your sin. In this week's psalm, the sick person believes you can get better if you serve others. "Blessed are those who have regard for the lowly and the poor; in the day of misfortune the Lord will deliver them. The Lord will help them on their sickbed, he will take away all their ailment when they are ill." So, if you take care of the lowly and the poor throughout your life, the psalm says, God will take care of you when you are sick, or you need help.

In the gospel Jesus forgives the sins and heals the illness of a paralytic. In the first reading God promises to forgive the sins of ancient Israel. God desires our physical and spiritual health, so we try to please God by the way we live every day.

Sometimes we don't. Sometimes we take shortcuts. We ignore the needs of the poor. We lie about someone at work. We shoplift. We speed. We cheat on taxes. We check out pornography on the net. We do things that are wrong, things we think no one will notice, things that might make us feel a little richer, a little more secure, a little more important. But those decisions change us. They make us deficient people. They make us less pleasing to God and less influential when we make our requests.

When we are sick we don't feel right, and we don't act right. It becomes hard to pray, hard to be our best selves. Being sick is bad, but it's not as bad as being a person who takes too many shortcuts, and whose entire life is oriented toward false ways. We all sin, and when we do, the sooner we turn back to God the better. In those times, today's psalm is a good prayer: "Lord, heal my soul, for I have sinned against you."