

THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS

Luke 11:1-13

Lately, there have been so many terrible things happening in this world that I find it hard to keep track of what's going on where. Between a global record-breaking heat wave, shootings, wars and rumors of wars, fires and famines, our members' needs and my own needs, my prayer list keeps growing exponentially. I am sure yours are, too. It feels like we should add a few more hours to our 24-hour day just to fit everything in we want to pray for.

Martin Luther would be pleased with such an undertaking: "Today I have a lot to do, so I need to spend more time in prayer," he famously proclaimed. When I announced that I was accepted at Austin Seminary and would soon begin my theological studies many years ago, Ara Carapetyan, our choir director at *First Presbyterian Church* in Houston at the time, took me aside, put his hand on my shoulder and said to me in his deep baritone voice: "Pray! A lot!!"

Prayer is indeed a big part of every religious professional's portfolio. Yet somehow it also seems that now every politician, public official, and celebrity is compelled to weigh in on every kind of adversity that presents itself. "My thoughts and prayers are with ..." has become the standard response to tragedy as the cameras keep recording. While I neither have the right nor the ability to judge the sincerity of such expressions of sympathy and empathy, I find myself growing weary of hearing this phrase. Weary because "thoughts and prayers" might be a good start to tackle our mounting

predicaments but more often than not, the phrase “thoughts and prayers” begins to ring hollow when it is where our engagement ends. And that simply is not enough.

But don’t take it from me. Take it from Jesus. He has a lot to say about “thoughts and prayers” in Luke’s gospel. First, he teaches his disciples who are just as overwhelmed as we are how to pray by giving them what has come to be known as the *Lord’s Prayer*. Not the version we use every Sunday, but a rather shortened one without any of the fancy wording: “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” (Lk 11:1-4).

And then he tells them two parables. One in which he calls them, and us, to continually ask, knock on doors, and search until doors open and we find what we are searching for (Lk 11:5-13). The other in which he tells the story of a woman who keeps pestering a judge who “neither fears God nor has respect for people” until she receives justice, or, more aptly translated, until her thirst for vengeance is satisfied (Lk. 18:1-8).

Stacy Johnson, my theology professor at Austin Seminary, challenged us in our first semester of study with this question: “Does it make sense to pray for rain?” I was not sure how to answer his question and neither were my classmates. The answer, of course, is “yes, and no.” Yes, because in an ever-drying world which heats up more and more each year, water has become a resource more valuable than silver and gold. Just ask our farmers ... or our scientists who are feverishly working on engineering draught-resistant plants.

It is so dry out West right now that bodies which the mafia pitched into *Lake Mead* years ago are beginning to surface due to a record-low water table. We pray for rain because we are painfully aware that the delicate balance of God's creation is visibly out of whack. And our prayer for rain becomes part of our prayer for God's kingdom to come ... sooner rather than later.

And no, it doesn't make sense to pray for rain because God is not a cosmic vending machine. We can't just pop in a prayer for rain and expect a deluge on demand. We cannot expect God to just whip up miracles on the fly for the sins we have committed over decades and centuries and whose consequences we are now living into.

I think there are several things we can learn from Jesus and how he approaches prayer. Jesus does not attach any moral value to the practice of prayer. For Jesus, prayer is not a competition of whose prayers are better than others, and it is not a struggle for power where one person out-prays the other. His approach, rather, is simple without being simplistic.

When you pray, he says to his disciples, pray like this—not with fancy words but with your heart. Pray knowing your place as sinners in constant need of God's grace, forgiving others just as we have been forgiven. Don't let up in your prayers. Keep asking, keep searching, keep knocking on doors. In other words, don't just sit at home and pray but get out there and follow-up on your prayers until they become reality in this world.

The late Reformed Swiss theologian Karl Barth once said, "The clasping of the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of this world." Furthermore,

and following the reading of Jesus's teachings regarding prayer in Luke's gospel, Barth asserts that "In prayer, we are friends of God, called to the side of God and at the side of God, living and ruling and reigning with God to bring about God's kingdom."

Other than Jesus, obviously, a good role model for the kind of prayer he envisioned is King Solomon, King David's son. In a dream, God comes to Solomon and encourages him, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon said: "Your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous that they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, to discern between good and evil." Solomon prays for a discerning mind so that he can then govern God's people according to God's will. Prayer and action, one flowing from the other. Solomon does not treat God as a means to an end, but acknowledges God as the giver of all good gifts to benefit all people.

In other words, Jesus and Solomon remind us that our "thoughts and prayers" need to be followed up by our actions, not self-serving actions, but actions that build community and benefit all people. Otherwise, our prayers will yield nothing, and God's kingdom will remain in heaven, never reaching earth. However, if we persist in word and deed, God will "give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him." Not because God will reward us for our efforts. But because we fulfill our calling in building the kind of world God intended in the first place. Now such "thoughts and prayers," and actions, are worthy of our imitation.

May it be so. For you, and for me.

Amen.

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July 24, 2022