

#AlternativeFaith: *Prayer for the Ages*

Matthew 5:8, 6:5-15

Eleven days ago, when a crazed man drove his rented car up onto the sidewalk of Westminster Bridge outside of Parliament in London, killing and injuring several people before he himself was killed, Londoners felt the stunning shock of terrorism once again. A few blocks from Parliament, the Rev. Giles Fraser heard the news and immediately opened the doors to his church's sanctuary for anyone to come and pray. Social media, through the Twitter feed #PrayforLondon, kept the public informed of the unfolding drama and urging prayer for the victims, including the police officer who, at the time, was still fighting for his life.

As Fraser wrote in a newspaper column a day or two later, he started noticing tweets from those who were outraged by the insensitivity of calling for prayers when, as one person put it, "It's these bloody stupid beliefs that help create this violence in the first place!"

As his Twitter feed exploded into a vitriolic debate over religion, Fraser lamented:

...in millions of micro-encounters, all this surround-sound unpleasantness builds up and gradually eats away at our civility. Under the flag of convenience called free speech, people tear up their decency in the search for "likes". Oh, how cheaply we trade the things that matter most. Have social media and the stamping foot of the 24-hour news cycle killed off the quiet dignity of grief, both religious and non-religious? ¹

A very good question.

So often today, crises are made even more traumatic by the impulsive reactions and toxic tweets from angry people, who provoke in turn their own backlash. Overlooked is the time needed to absorb the initial shock of terrible events like this, as we ourselves required with September 11, Sandy

¹ Giles Fraser, "Prayer is not wishful nonsense. It helps us to shut up and think", www.theguardian.com, 23 March 2017.

Hook, and many other similar moments of violence that stunned us into silence.

What moved me in Fraser's column was his comments about the place of prayer, making this appeal to a skeptical and cynical public:

Prayer is not a way of telling God the things [God] already knows. Nor is it some act of collective lobbying, whereby the almighty is encouraged to see the world from your perspective if you screw up your face really hard and wish it so. ... Prayer is mostly about emptying your head waiting for stuff to become clear. There is no secret formula. And holding people in your prayers is not wishful thinking. It's a sort of compassionate concentration, where someone is deliberately thought about in the presence of the widest imaginable perspective—like giving them a mental cradling.

But above all, prayer is often just a jolly good excuse to shut up for a while and think. The adrenaline that comes from shock does not make for clear thinking or considered judgment. Those who rush to outrage say the stupidest things.²

I appreciate Fraser's perspective and agree with him about the value of prayer in times of crisis. Silence is not an indicator of inaction; it is often our best form of response until we find clarity.

I also find appealing Fraser's image of "mentally cradling" someone in a time of need. Prayer is a form of loving embrace, of holding someone close to you, even if they are not physically present. Prayer is a way to get outside of ourselves in a given moment and into the life of another in an attempt to share their burden and suffering. Or, as the case may be, sometimes it's disrupting our own preoccupation with personal pain and anguish in order to gain perspective and comfort. Prayer is an empathetic act of caring, as well as an emotionally stabilizing one; when done well, it can be a clarifying time in the midst of traumatic events.

I didn't always grasp this particular value to prayer. When I was a younger man in my first years of ministry, prayer for me was a spiritual

² Ibid.

discipline one cultivated in order to be, not only more religiously devout, but more effective in gaining results. It was premised on a belief that God helps those whom God knows best—a relational motivation that seems rather self-serving at this point in time. As a young minister, I also viewed prayer as a skill to be learned (since I wasn't very confident or eloquent on my feet). I admired those who could say just the right thing in just the right way, where you could easily imagine they had a special sense of communion with God, given their evident spiritual confidence, calmness, and comfort. In comparison, my pastoral prayers were often awkward and inarticulate. Even in private, my bumbling utterances sounded more like laundry lists of needs and concerns, rather than the cultivation of spiritual insight.

Eventually, I grew wise enough to realize, much like Fraser, the best thing to do is let prayer be silence—an emptying of one's mind and heart. My prayers now are usually in quiet solitude in my thoughts, letting the concerns come forth as I consider those I know or situations I'm facing, or they are like brief mental text messages being sent throughout the day—not only for some quick insight or occasional intervention, but also to help me be mindful of the divine presence in the ordinary moments of daily life.

This is the way many people pray, I suppose—at least those who don't employ a more disciplined style. It's not terribly regimented or eloquent, but prayers of this type have the desired effect of calming us down or centering us into a moment where we want to be attentive. I like to view prayer as something that doesn't change God as much as it changes us, as Soren Kierkegaard wisely reminded us. It brings us into the gracious presence of our generous God, with whom we don't need to plead, but who will awaken us to the ways the divine hand is already present and providing. In a moment of crisis, it is a way to calm ourselves and allow the

better angels within us take control over our immediate (and often harmful) reactions.

Calmness and clarity may be the most important rewards we receive in prayer—perhaps even the rewards to which Jesus was referring in our text for today.

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut your door and pray to your Abba³ who is in secret; and your Abba who sees in secret will reward you.

With all the distractions of life, a solitary setting is usually the best to allow us to be more acutely aware of God’s presence, wherever that happens for us, so we can communicate in silence and allow our inward being to commune with God’s Spirit. In our silence, God speaks to us through the thoughts that come to mind to help us gain perspective and wisdom.

In Celtic spirituality, you will often hear about finding “thin places” where one encounters God’s presence, who reaches into the depths of one’s inner life. “Thin places” are times, settings, or activities that awaken the senses to inspire us, comfort us, and hold us close into the sense of God. The points of entrance into a “thin place” vary. It may be in this sanctuary, for instance, where you have a lifelong collection of meaningful memories. Or it may be out in nature, where you experience a moment that transforms you. Being musical, I often find music as my point of entrance into a thin place—perhaps songs or hymns that transport me emotionally or spiritually to another level or settle me in ways I otherwise might not find. Knowing where your “thin place” is—the place where you sense God most—is invaluable to calming your spirit and being able to unburden your soul.

³ “Abba” is the original Aramaic word (masculine form), referring to familial spiritual oneness and intimacy with God, which is the point of the term, not gender specificity. Tradition has rendered it as “Father,” incorrectly implying a masculine deity. It is not unlike how “Adam” in Genesis 1 is construed as the name of the original male, when in the Hebrew text, “Adam” refers to humans—both male and female—who are made in the image of God, who are formed out of the dust (“adamah”) of the earth.

Securing these private encounters are a part of prayer, which is the way our spirits commune best with God.

Jesus demonstrated this by frequently getting away by himself to pray. Though we don't have anecdotal examples of him praying with his disciples, we assume the prayer we refer to as "The Lord's Prayer" was presented as a model or guide for "thin places", because it summarizes well, through its simplicity and the straight-forward petitions, the gratitude we have for God and a range of basic human needs and the Gospel's liberating intent. N.T. Wright explains its theological significance:

The prayer is given by Jesus to constitute his followers as the true Exodus people. They are to succeed, not least by prayer, where the original wilderness generation failed. The prayer moves from the disciples' relation to God, through the honoring of God's name and the doing of his will, to provisions for bodily needs and dealing with evil. ... The Lord's Prayer may be seen as being to the church as the Ten Commandments were to Israel; not just something to do...but the heart of the new covenant charter. ⁴

Granted, many of us might have a hard time sensing this in most recitations of the Lord's Prayer, where it tends to be little more than a liturgical element in times of worship. Honestly, the words can become rote and meaningless, mere phrases we repeat by heart. But I've been with people who were on their death beds when such words brought great comfort and a sense of God's presence into that moment. I've recited the Lord's Prayer with dementia patients who remarkably can recover nearly every phrase and word. I've heard people facing a crisis find focus and calm by praying this prayer. There's spiritual power in memorization and continual recitation that may even surprise us, where it might become the only means through which God speaks to us in our time of need.

⁴ N.T. Wright, "The Lord's Prayer as a Paradigm of Christian Prayer," www.ntwrightpage.com.

Marcus Borg in his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, referred to the Lord's Prayer as a means to a thin place.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer together, the point is not to "think hard" about the meanings of the words and to mean them. As a child, I remember being told that it was important not simply to say the Lord's Prayer, but to pray the Lord's Prayer—that is, to really mean it. So my attention became focused on thinking hard about the words. I no longer say or pray the Lord's Prayer in such an effortful manner. Rather, the point is to let the drone of these words that we know by heart become a thin place. For Simone Weil, one of the twentieth century's remarkable Western spiritual figures, saying the Lord's Prayer consistently brought her into a thin place, and not because she was paying attention to the meaning of the words.⁵

Because of its extraordinary place in the heart of Christianity, this is a prayer for the ages. It makes more sense to me now than it once did. Without becoming superstitious about it, there is a sense of divine transcendence cultivated through this prayer that exceeds our ability to fully grasp its impact upon people—a spiritual power that does make this a prayer for the ages, as it has certainly been for two thousand years. It's a prayer that leads us to a "thin place", deeply rooted and centered in God and yet, profoundly relevant to human existence on so many levels of life.

For me, what that means is, at every age we pray, not only *to* God, but *into* God, in the capacity that we can and wherever the "thin place" for us may be. When we sense God, it's because we have allowed the presence of God to purify our minds and hearts from the matters that disturb, alarm, and upset us. That's the letting go of anxiousness and worry. Through the "thin place" of prayer, we discover God is already present within our lives. Moments like these are, by nature, pure and sacred, not because we ourselves are such, but because we are transported into the divine presence that is. We become pure in heart as we come to see God.

⁵ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2003, pg. 159.

Such experiences provide us a glimpse of heaven by returning calmness to our souls and clarity to our minds, as we pause to come to know who God is and where God is in the storied telling of our lives and in the unfolding revelation of the ages.

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