

Thoughts and Prayers

October 8, 2017

“Our thoughts and prayers are with you.” Thoughts and prayers. Who hasn’t said that? Whether it’s a politician being mindful of a natural disaster, a friend or neighbor learning of a child’s leukemia, or perhaps, most ubiquitously, when we know of someone who dies: “Our thoughts and prayers are with you.”

We’ve all been trained, and rightfully so, not to say that “he’s in a better place” or “she is part of God’s plan.” We understand that those phrases are insensitive, and so we say, “Our thoughts and prayers are with you.” And yet telling someone that they’re in our thoughts and prayer seems inadequate.

Do my thoughts and prayers matter? The short answer (granted you know this is coming from your pastor) is yes. Quite simply saying “You’re in my thoughts and prayers” expresses that you care. Have you ever had someone tell you that they were thinking of you and it really brightened your soul? It’s comforting. You feel assured, cared for, less alone.

I can tell you that after my dad’s death the hundreds of cards that you all sent were a balm. There were tangible representation of people’s thoughts and prayers. They were an arm of comfort, a shoulder of support. Our minds often wander, during a meeting, on a drive, during a long sermon. Consciously directing our thoughts and prayers brings others’ needs to focus in our mind. Thoughts and prayers encourage comfort. They strengthen our friends and family who are struggling.

Pastor Adam Weber points out that in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, the passage that I just read, that we are to “encourage one another.” More literally, or perhaps a better translation of encourage, is actually “comfort” or “strengthen.” We are to comfort and strengthen one another. The same word actually has even yet another meaning and that is “pray for”: to encourage and pray for a friend; to comfort and pray for a coworker; to strengthen and pray for fellow humans experiencing the unimaginable. That is what that passage from first Thessalonians tells us to do.

Now, that’s all well and good, but after whole islands are left devastated for months after abject devastation, after earthquakes decimate already vulnerable populations, after hundreds of families woke last week to hear that their loved ones had been shot and policy would remain the same, what do you make of those who say thoughts and prayers aren’t enough? It reminds me of the debate during the early days of the Iraq war. Do you remember that there were signs that were distributed through churches and other community organizations. One said, “Pray for peace.” And do you remember what the other one said? “Work for peace.” People debated which one was more important, which one they should have. You probably know me well enough by now. I had both. The answer is to pray for peace and work for peace.

As we read in the letter to James, faith without works is dead. So, too, with prayer. There are many works that can align themselves with our prayers for our neighbors.

Think of if you are praying for a neighbor who you have learned has cancer. Maybe the works that follow that prayer are bringing them a meal. Maybe the works are donating to the American Cancer Society or encouraging a young person to study cancer so that future generations don't have to go through the same things that this neighbor is doing. Maybe the works are voting for politicians who have a soul and understand the unimaginable stress our medical system and insurance system put on people who are deeply vulnerable.

You see, central to prayer is the transformation of the one who is praying. Morgan Guyton points out:

Yes, it is valid to ask God to bring comfort and love to the victims of the mass shooting in Las Vegas. But the primary purpose of prayer is to tune myself into the Holy Spirit so that God can transform me and use me to transform the world around me. Prayer is not an alternative to taking action; it is an important means by which God prepares me to take action. If I think I have nothing to do after I've prayed, then I need to go back and pray again."

Those who are in the midst of tragedy will tell us just how important prayer is.

The Reverend Matthew Crebbin is the Senior Minister of Newtown Congregational Church UCC in Newtown, Connecticut. He writes:

First...DO PRAY...I know that many within and beyond the faith community will say that thoughts and prayers are not enough and this is true. But prayer will be needed for the journey ahead. It's been nearly five years since the horror at Sandy Hook School and I would not have come this far without prayer.

If you cannot find any coherent thoughts that you can put together, then pray with "sighs too deep for human words." Those of us who have been affected by gun violence often cannot find any words in moments like this – so there is lots of sighing and silence...lots of silence. And then out of the silence...pray:

Pray your sorrow, your anger, your hopelessness. Pray your faith and your doubt.

Pray for the murdered, the injured, the traumatized – each one a unique and precious treasure.

Pray for families and communities forever altered.

Pray for individuals and families in other places who in this moment are being re-traumatized.

Pray for all those around our world who are targets of violence because their beauty as a child of God does not fit somebody else's definition of what is righteous or pure or worthy of sacred care.

Pray for all of us who by intent or apathy continue to allow our nation to worship at the altar of the gun – and for those who believe that innocence must forever be offered on that altar for the sake of freedom.

Pray for those who will only offer prayers and nothing else. Pray for those who say it is too soon to talk about solutions and who will always find reasons to avoid the conversation.

Pray for all of us that we might refuse to become further isolated from those with whom we disagree – and choose to live only in theological and political camps that feel safe and reassuring.

Pray for those who think they know all the reasons that things like this happen – and who will soon return to a cocoon of self-righteous certainty.

Pray for those who will become even more captive to the way of fear – and only end up further down the path of death and brokenness.

Pray for shalom...for peace and well-being for everyone – including even those who commit unspeakable acts of violence.

Pray for yourself – that you might not be overwhelmed by “disaster fatigue” even while you remember that you are not called to offer yourself on the altar of the good – by trying to do so much that you destroy the sacredness of your own life and relationships.

Pray...and even as you are praying...commit yourself to be a part of the transformation. And then, prayerfully choose one specific thing that you will do today to reduce gun violence and create just a little more peace on this planet.

Pray...and in your praying become a living and breathing prayer that this broken and grieving world so desperately needs.

Friends, our thoughts and prayers are not enough, but they're a start and they do matter. My prayer this week is for you, and for me, and for all of us, that our prayers will be transformative, bringing about the society that our God created us to be. We may be the transformation of God in the world. Alleluia and Amen.

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