

John 17:20-26

Why Pray?

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St. Mary the Virgin

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Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then he said. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

In this difficult week we hear, although not as much as formerly, that our Thoughts and Prayers are with the victims and their families. What difference do Thoughts and Prayers make? Are they meaningless words of empty consolation by those who refuse to act? Probably.

Miroslav Volf, a theologian at Yale Divinity School, has said that *"There is something deeply hypocritical about praying for a problem you are unwilling to resolve."*¹

We are caught in a bind on prayers. It's not a bind that Christianity put us in but one that secular thinkers have put us in. It is demonstrably true that prayer does not reliably bring us wealth, health, sports victories, success, good marriages, etc. Some who preach the Prosperity Gospel, most notably in recent years Joel Osteen, have convinced many that if we only pray the right way, and tithe to his church, and buy his books, then we will be, individually, financially blessed as he has been financially blessed. Obviously if a member of Osteen's church isn't financially blessed, and isn't beautiful, and isn't healed then that member hasn't been praying correctly or giving to Osteen sacrificially, there is a flaw in that member's faith. You and I would join the secularist in saying that whatever he's preaching, the prosperity gospel is not prayer. God is not manipulated in that way to grant us health, wealth and the toys that demonstrate success in this world.

This does not exhaust the argument against prayer, secularism puts us in another bind on prayer by citing studies showing what happens to the brains of Buddhist monks when they pray². Secular Society concludes that prayer is simply a pep talk that we give ourselves. There is no God but it nevertheless does wonderful things for centering us. Of

¹ Volf is a theologian on the faculty of Yale Divinity School. <https://www.missionalliance.org/the-continued-problem-with-thoughts-and-prayers/>

² For instance: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-12661646>

course I'm combining prayer with meditation here but the point is nevertheless true. In a binary world prayer is either our way of petitioning God to get a blessing or it is an internal pep talk useful for calming us down.

Both of these examples of prayer center on the individual. Even a cursory reading of today's gospel will show that only plural pronouns appear. Jesus was not talking about isolated prayer. What was he saying?

For those who've heard me talk about the bible you've heard me say frequently that God created you and me to be in relationship with God. In other words God created us to surprise God. So God is genuinely interested in what you have to say and engages you and me and our thoughts in creating our future, including God's future. This involves a radical change in the way many of us look at God. When we say, as our reading from Revelation said today, that God is the α and ω , we are not saying that God is unchanging and that the future is determined. It is a statement of God's universal existence, God is the beginning and end of all things; it is not a claim of omniscience. In other words our relationship to God is real and is important to God. None of us are trivial. Each of us is important. However, God does not live in isolation and neither do we. We are here engaged in corporate worship. The beauty of the way Mass is celebrated in this church is that it involves all of our senses. We taste, we see, we smell, we feel (I will be glad when the peace is restored so we can fully feel) and we listen to each other. Mass only exists because we are here as a community, not as an isolated group of pietistic individuals but as a community that rejoices in our gathering. I am not here this morning to have my individual moment with God. I am here this morning to celebrate God's presence in us as a whole. Were you not here I would be forbidden to celebrate this Mass. We need each other.

Whatever the solution to the plague of gun violence is, it will involve our acting as a community and not as individuals. Fear makes us solitary; faith makes us a community.

When I read the bible I see biblical figures having dialogs with God and God changing God's mind on what to do³. Intercession works. We can bring new information to God and frankly God enjoys and is amused by the new information we bring. Together with God we are creating our future.

It seems to me that many people have rejected faith and belief in God because they have been presented a faith centered on a God which is too small. What I call the "rabbit's foot god" or the "god of lost causes." Either description is of a god who is too small. I do not seek belief in a divine Santa Claus. I find meaning in realizing that together God and I are creating my future and our future, and that in some small way I am part of creating God's future as you are part of creating God's future, and that future is always communal. I can keep God's life interesting. This god who is too small is also generally a god of individuals and not the God of the faithful.

Richard Rohr reminds us that God is Prayer. Prayer is not something we do to get God's attention. Prayer is participating in God. We join God's prayer when we pray. Of course this means that prayer is not simply petition. Prayer is, as Rohr frequently reminds us, our way of living without Fear. We live in a fear based culture. We arm ourselves to the teeth because we're afraid. Many support the oxymoron Christian

³ Deut 32 and 33

Nationalism because they're afraid. We can only be replaced if we believe that we are not uniquely valued. If my only achievement, or my greatest achievement, was being born male and white, then I have much to fear because I have much to lose. But if I live in prayer then I cannot be afraid because I know that being white, or being male, or being an American or an Episcopalian or anything else does not define me. I am defined by confidence in my relationship with God. Unfortunately few of us trust this relationship and instead seek power, especially power over the other. We live in fear of losing power and status because we do not have confidence in the one who loves us. Today's Gospel is meant to inspire us to have confidence no matter the reality we find ourselves in. We will not be abandoned. We join God in prayer. Even when elementary school age kids are murdered we join God in prayer.

I was going to go on and preach about how God can redeem any situation. Then the shooting in Uvalde Texas happened. Senator Cruz made a statement about how gun violence is related to illegal immigration, violent criminals and mental illness. He decried any effort to take away the constitutional right of Americans to bear arms. In other words he offered the grieving of Uvalde Texas, Thoughts and Prayers. How does Thoughts and Prayers differ from what I've been preaching about thus far in this sermon? I listened to an interview with a Texas State Legislator on Morning Edition, Thursday, who denied the problem was guns and blamed instead on open border, despite the reality that we export weapons to Mexico, and furthermore he blamed schools for being insufficiently hardened among other things⁴. Then President Trump pointed out that criminals will never disarm so we must arm. The shooter in Uvalde was not a criminal until he arrived at the school. He bought his weapons legally. So while fewer are saying Thoughts and Prayers, they're also refusing to look at reality. Thoughts and Prayers amount to a meaningless offer of consolation in the face of the inevitable. Gun violence is the outcome of arming anyone who wishes to be armed. It is inevitable in our culture as things exist today. It need not be inevitable. Our society's unwillingness to live without fear makes it inevitable.

As I mentioned above throughout this prayer that is today's Gospel, we have plural pronouns. Jesus is praying for a community in which all of our lives are precious and anything that harms any of our lives is excluded. We are called to build the world to be like heaven, that's the meaning in the Lord's Prayer of the petition: *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*. Possessing firearms is not part of the kingdom. I do not live in Fear. I live in the confidence that Jesus prayed for me in this gospel and continues to pray for me. I live in the confidence that my prayers are my way of participating in God. I live in confidence that God's will is that we make our 21st century reality as much like heaven as we can. We worship the Prince of Peace⁵. The NT is replete with references to the peace that Jesus brings us from the announcement of his birth to the shepherds, Luke 2 to the very end. Throughout the NT peace is invoked, sought, given and declared. It is never paired with violence.

There are many reasons why people commit acts of violence. As we read when this happens, the only industrialized nation in which acts of violence result in many deaths is this one, we have these acts of violence because we are armed. We do not trust

⁴ <https://www.capradio.org/news/npr/story?storyid=1101423635>

⁵ Isaiah 9.

the peace so we live in fear. If being armed saved us from violence we would be the most peaceful culture in the world; we are not that peaceful culture.

How do we redeem yet another unimaginable tragedy? We cannot continue to do the same thing, arm ourselves and permit weapons of mass destruction to be held by anyone, and have any hope that there will be no massacres in the future. There have, as of Thursday afternoon, been 27 school shootings in this country since January ¹⁶. The same report finds 212 mass shootings in the U.S. since Jan 1. How do we redeem this tragedy? Our actions, led by our prayers that unite us with God in God's prayer life, must lead us to take action to disarm our nation, still our fears and help us see Christ in everyone we meet.

This is a senseless tragedy that we have seen before and done nothing more than offer Thoughts and Prayers. I hope we will finally pray for the courage to disarm our fellow citizens and have faith in the Prince of Peace to protect us. And having prayed for that courage will take action. To repeat the quote from Miroslav Volf, *There is something deeply hypocritical about praying for a problem you are unwilling to resolve.*

We are called to ACT. How do we act? We live, fund, demonstrate and lobby for change. We are not passive. We do not say that's the way it is and give up. We act. We put prayer into action. We do not become resigned to this horrific reality.

Praying is important, but if we refuse to have our minds changed by the love of God then what's the point? Praying is intended to unite us with God. A God who grieves for all who have been shot. A God who grieves for all who feel they need weapons to know peace. We exist to live and demonstrate another way of being. We exist to show that vulnerability is not a weakness and living out of love for all of creation brings peace. We need to do a better job so we need to pray more and then act on what we know to be God's will.

⁶ <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/24/1101050970/2022-school-shootings-so-far>