

## Thoughts and Prayers

Sunday, November 3, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaiah 25:6-9

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

When something tragic occurs, it is customary to offer our “thoughts and prayers” to the victims and their families. The phrase “thoughts and prayers” is standard vocabulary in official statements of condolences from public figures after major tragedies and natural disasters. “Our thoughts and prayers are with all those affected by this [pick one] cowardly attack, horrific shooting, senseless tragedy, unprecedented calamity.”

The phrase seems like a good combination of words. “Prayers” is a shorthand way of saying that all persons of faith are in sympathy with you and are speaking to God on your behalf. “Thoughts” indicates that those of us who aren’t religious are feeling for you as well. It was like saying “Happy holidays and Merry Christmas” to cover all fronts.

Unfortunately, the phrase “thoughts and prayers” is now being denounced as an empty platitude, a cliché used in place of real and meaningful action. After the slaughter of 49 people by a gunman at two mosques in New Zealand last March, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez upset some people by tweeting, “What good are your thoughts & prayers when they don’t even keep the pews safe?” She followed that tweet with another that said, “‘Thoughts and prayers’ is reference to the NRA’s phrase used to deflect conversation away from policy change during tragedies.” Her tweets sparked a debate about the use of the phrase. In short, thoughts and prayers as an expression of condolence is now ridiculed as political camouflage or as a form of civilian slacktivism, that is, supporting a cause by means such as social media or online petitions, actions requiring very little effort or commitment.

Some critics of the phrase use the Bible to reinforce their belief that thoughts and prayers without effective action are meaningless. They quote James 2:14-16: *“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”* Likewise, in one of his addresses, Pope Francis stated, “Prayer that doesn’t lead to concrete action toward our brothers is a fruitless and incomplete prayer...Prayer and action must always be profoundly united.” Certainly, James and Pope Francis are right that words without action are not enough, no matter how good the words.

So, is “thoughts and prayers” anything more than verbal junk food? Andrew Klavan, a widely published writer of crime and suspense novels, believes it is still a valid expression of our grief. He commented in his *Daily Wire* podcast that “When tragedy or atrocity strikes... thoughts and prayers are not just an expression of compassion. They are...an expression of humility and helplessness. They are a way of saying: ‘There is nothing we can do in the face of this wickedness, but we stand in solidarity with the victims and ask God to comfort their families in their sorrow.’”

Our reading for today brought this debate over terminology to mind. It is a letter from Paul to the church at Thessalonica. In the first block (1:1-4), Paul clearly states that his readers are in his thoughts. Specifically, Paul says that he and his companions *“give thanks to God for you...because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing”* (v. 3). He goes on to say that he and his coworkers boast about the Thessalonians *“among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring”* (v. 4). It is obvious that Paul spent some considerable time thinking about those to whom he addressed this letter.

In the second block (1:11-12), Paul tells his readers that they are also in his prayers, but not in a generic “I’ll say a prayer for you” way. Again, Paul gets specific about the content of his prayers: *“We always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him”* (vv. 11-12). Paul’s thoughts and prayers are genuine expressions of his feelings toward the Thessalonian believers.

Paul shows us how to put meat on the bones of our thoughts and prayers. No matter how helpless we may feel expressing solidarity with the victims of a tragedy, and no matter that we know our words alone will not suffice, sincere thoughts and prayers are not nothing. Thoughts are *work*, because they push us to view things from the perspective of those directly affected, and especially when they lead us to consider if there is any real action we might take that will help. Could the grieving person use a hand right now with the kids or a relative for whom they are the caregiver? Could we run errands or rake the leaves or walk the dog for them? Is there some other task we can take off their plate for a little while?

In his book, *New Mercies I See*, Stan Purdum talks about being the pastor of a country church where several of the members were dairy farmers. One day, a child of one of those farmers died suddenly. Purdum rushed to the farm to offer what comfort he could. When he arrived, he found the family gathered in the house. Purdum knew at that time of day,

the father ought to be in the barn, milking cows, a task that needs to be done twice a day, without fail. A family member told Purdum that two of the neighbors, farmers themselves, showed up to handle the milking without being asked. Their thoughts for the grieving family led them to act.

Likewise, *prayer is work*. If you say your prayers are with someone, and you follow through by holding them in prayer, then you are putting yourself in a place to see beyond your own horizons and walk in someone else's shoes. Prayer deepens our empathy and puts us in a place where God can change us and lead us to some action we can take. Though all good things come from God, praying for others assumes that God may allow our prayers to be a *means* by which God does good for others.

Plus, we are speaking to God on someone's behalf, seeking God's grace for them at a time when they may be so wounded they cannot pray themselves. Peter advised the early Christians to *"be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray"* (1 Peter 4:7, NIV). In times of deep trouble or pain, people are likely to be anything but clear-minded and self-controlled. In dark times, we need the strength and the prayers of others to support us.

That's not to say that those who grieve cannot call out to God; but praying is not easy when grief has us tight in its grip. A prayer in which we petition God can be at least as demanding of our attention as writing a letter or carrying on a serious conversation, and when someone is in grief, we can shoulder some of the work of prayer for them. Our prayers add a new element to the situation. It's asking for God's help, and what greater source of help is there?

In times of tragedy, whether it affects many or only a few, thoughts and prayers will never be the whole answer, but often, they are all we have. We offer what we can. Writing about the difficulties of life, author Anne Lamott said: "It's funny: I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty bent old tools — friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty — and said, 'Do the best you can with these, they will have to do.' And mostly, against all odds, they're enough."

God gives us thoughts and prayers in our box of seemingly inadequate tools and tells us to do our best with them. Thus, our thoughts and prayers, sincerely and genuinely offered and followed through on, are never nothing. They are ways the Lord gives us to love our neighbor.

Tragedy and loss, violence and heartache are not what God intends for us. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God already has a great and glorious future prepared for us. *"On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine — the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken. In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation'"* (Isaiah 25:6-9).

As we gather at the communion table this morning, and as we remember members of our faith family who died this year, we are reminded that because of Christ's death and resurrection, the promise of our place at God's eternal banquet is assured. The problems of this world are not part of God's vision and they are not our ultimate reality, but until God's promised Kingdom comes, our thoughts and prayers remain with the victims and squarely rooted in God's love and grace and mercy.

Prayer: Holy One of days and nights, of sinners and saints, we are grateful for Your presence that abides in every corner of our living. You lurk quietly in the loneliest places in our hearts, keeping watch. You grieve with us in our devastations, our losses, our fears. You journey with us in our celebrations and our defeats, and even in the monotony of our days. You delight in us and love us. May we live in that love and delight, knowing that as we sink into You, we become more like You, wanting life and grace for this world and all peoples and creatures that live upon it. We pray for this world, for the places and precious people who are striving to recover from hurricanes and floods and raging fires. We pray for peace among nations; make us instruments of that peace. We pray for our youth that they may be surrounded by Your protection and challenged to be all of who You created them to be. We give thanks for all the saints in our lives, those who are living and those of blessed memory. We pray this prayer for Love's sake, Amen.

#### Sources:

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