

Persistence in Prayer

Preached at St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach, San Bernardino

Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

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I hear that in the city of Chino, there has been a strong push from some groups of Christians to institute prayer in city council and school board meetings. However, those heading up this effort have in mind the right sort of prayers. They aren't thinking of my friends in the Amadea Mosque or the Church of the Latter-Day Saints around the corner and down the street. They don't seem overly enthusiastic about the folks from the Buddhist temple on Central Ave. Only the "right" prayers please.

We settled this issue early on in our nation's history. The VI Article of the Constitution prohibits any religious test for office. The First Amendment in the Free Exercise Clause states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

We got to this understanding, not by virtue of any enlightened notion of tolerance or the magnanimous inclusion of all points of view. If we will remember our American history, we had a multitude of religious expressions in the several states. If we were to have a United States, we couldn't be waging the religious wars that lead to the slaughter of millions in Europe. Yes, we burnt Quakers at the stake. We demonized Baptists. Catholics were anathema in many parts of the country. Episcopalians were suspect because of their origin in the Church of England. Expediency won in the end. In our

wisdom, we decided not to kill one another over what might be the correct form of prayer.

Prayer, used to promote tribalism is not prayer at all but hypocrisy. The ludicrous supposition that God is compelled by pious utterances to impress in the halls of our public assemblies – well it turns the stomach. To paraphrase my mentor, Joe Wesley Matthews, such prayer is to religion as pigeons are to statues. Don't take it from me, but from our Lord – Matthew 6:6.

Close your closet door, and in silence, open your heart to God. There, God has half a chance of getting hold of you. And listen. Do not bring your laundry list. Ask not what God can do for you, but what you might do for God – to paraphrase a famous quote. Ask how you might be a living blessing to your neighbor, which is in fact to be a blessing to God.

Will there be prayer in school? As long as there are tests, there will be prayer in school. When I taught junior high in Oakland, so many of my students were ill-equipped to do eighth grade work. They didn't have any hope of passing even a simple quiz, much less the end of the chapter test. Of the kids in what was called a "normal" class, almost one half could not read the textbook. Of those who could, many had no idea of how to get any useful information out of it. The test was just one more assault on their fragile self-esteem. One more message that you are failing. You're worthless in this school. I could almost hear the inward groans of the spirit as my students stared blankly at their exam papers. Many could not write a complete sentence. It was so painful to watch the body language of these defeated souls. Of course, there was prayer. Fervent prayer -- prayer born out of defeat. An inward groaning that broke my heart.

Of course, I remember my feeble prayers before semester exams. I remember a prayer before my chemistry exam. And it was

answered. Yes, answered loud and clear – “Forney, you really screwed up. Next time, open the textbook. Go over your notes.” As a small child I wanted a pocket knife so badly, that desire was front and center of my bedtime prayers. Even when I was told that this was not a proper thing to pray for, that didn’t stop my silent add-on before the “amen.” I never got that pocket knife until much later when I purchased my own.

So, what is persistence in prayer? Prayer is an alignment of our spirit with what gives life. I would call that the will of God. It is the voiced or unvoiced desire of our hearts for goodness – a cry from the heart.

Rabbi Beerman used to say that his marching feet were his prayers. Now, this is something I resonate with. I find prayer most efficacious as I respond to the spirit within. If I allow my prayer to move not only my heart but also my feet. My wallet and credit cards. My datebook -- those things I clutch most tightly to my chest. Good thoughts alone don’t go anywhere.

Engaged prayer has the power to fill my spirit and brings joy to my days. Such prayer connects me to my neighbor. The end result may only be a smidge deeper understanding on my part. A bit more compassion for one less fortunate and beat down. Such prayer, when I allow it to move me, results in listening that hears beyond words. To pray without ceasing opens up of life to be a vision of wonder. And it opens me to the cries and moans those around me. It is spiritual persistence.

I have been as of late, especially sensitive to the cries of our Kurdish allies. This past Sunday I had a chance to speak with a friend who is married to a Kurd. Suzann’s husband, Fouad, is from northern Iraq, far from the disaster unfolding in Syria, yet he feels the pain as deeply as if they were next door to the carnage. Speaking with Suzanne, she shared the anguish of our betrayal.

Her pain and that of her family was palpable. My prayers have led me to be in solidarity with her and Fouad, to reach out. I have spoken out. I have written to the editor to express my dismay. These are not people half way around the earth. They are dear friends, next to my heart.

Such is the sentiment I hear from members of our military who have fought shoulder to shoulder with the brave men and women of the Kurdish forces. Yes, they do have women in their military. Northern Kurdistan is perhaps the most democratic society in the Middle East. The pain of their betrayal on the whim of someone who knows nothing of the bond between our two peoples is incomprehensible. To see the pictures of Kurdish prisoners summarily executed on the side of the road by the Turkish army and their proxies is more than the heart can bear. To paraphrase Tom Paine in part, through the childish actions of one man, we have unleashed the “full contagion of hell” on these people. And they weren’t even invited to the negotiations that sealed their fate!

And as they are driven from their cities and villages, are we prepared to build them new habitations. Are we prepared to replant their olive orchards and pistachio trees? Will we restore their belongings or just leave them to freeze this coming winter? I doubt it.

O Lord, may we be a powerful people of prayer – prayer that would move us to make restitution for this unbelievable act of folly. May the deep groans of prayer move us to reach out to the refugees already in our midst. May the deep groans and sighs of prayer, too deep for words, move us to “engaged compassion.”

Thank God for Senator Mitt Romney for having the rare courage to denounce this dereliction. Censure by Congress is prayer in action. May we persist as did that elderly woman in Jesus’ parable. Prayer without ceasing -- groans and sighs too deep for words. Yes, they have the power to move people of prayer to action.

But before action, however, prayer, fervent prayer of the heart awakens us. Urgent prayer awakens us to what we are doing and what is going on around us.

Prayer is like my old training sergeant bellowing at the top of his lungs, “Wake that man up” when one of us would fall asleep during a training film. It is through prayer we wrestle with God as did Jacob. Wakefulness is the blessing we receive. Matthew enjoins us to be alert. “Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.” For the person persistent in prayer, the Lord appears daily, like the light show that begins every dawn.

Prayer alerts us not only to life’s crises but also to the beauty and satisfaction to be had in this life. What welled up in my heart this past week along with my anguish over the devastation that had befallen the Kurds, was deep gratitude for the life of Elijah Cummings. My heart our nation has been opened to the beautiful life of this man. Gratitude -- that is what prayer can bring.

Representative Elijah Cummings was a kind man. His empathy for those who came before his House Committee on Oversight was legend. As a faithful member of New Psalmist Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland, Elijah was a man of tenacious prayer.

The grace he showed during Michael Cohen’s testimony, his overture to Republican congressman Mark Meadows, called a racist – that is what set Elijah apart. It was that ability for empathy, even towards those with whom he disagreed. He was the embodiment of “kindness, empathy, compassion, grace, dignity and love,” wrote Mika Brzezinski. That is why she and Joe Scarborough asked Elijah to officiate at their wedding.¹

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/know-your-value/feature/remembering-elijah-cummings-why-joe-i-asked-him-officiate-our-ncna1068331>

We looked to Representative Cummings for hope. He inspired in us what he embodied, grace, love, peace, patriotism. Elijah was the light in dark times. Nothing came easy for this son of a sharecropper. But his love and dedication to people and the truth, and his humanity, made him a force for good. His voice will be missed. We are heartbroken at his passing.²

It has been said that we only use a small portion our minds, maybe as little as forty percent, or even less. And how much more is lost to mindless activities? Game shows and mind-numbing television, boredom, fantasy, daydreaming, stewing over past slights, and the video games on our electronic devices, games that suck our brains right out of our skulls.

A life of prayer, of meditation, pulls us back into life, back into thankfulness. It pulls us into engagement on the streets and into personal renewal. Prayer pulls us back into our families and those who love us. It pulls us into beauty. It pulls us into resistance to the systemic forces of racism, consumerism and militarism.

Prayer is silence. Prayer is song and poetry. Prayer is deep meditation. Prayer is persistence. It is marching feet.

Out of a textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, came one of the most beautiful prayers of the women's movement. Helen Todd, In 1911, covered that labor action. She told her readers that not only did the women fight for fair wages, but decent conditions and life's other amenities as well. Workers need "life's Bread, which is home,

shelter and security, and the Roses of life, music, education, nature and books..."²

² Ibid.

That strike would later be known as the Bread and Roses Strike. It was to be memorialized later in poetry by James Oppenheim and then set to music, sung by Judy Collins in a lilting, heavenly voice. It's is a prayer of the yearning of hearts for a just and decent society. In our time when three persons own as much as ninety percent of the rest of Americans, it is a prayer for our time. When workers are ground by the gig economy and living on the streets of our cities.

As we come marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill-lofts gray
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing, "Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses."

As we come marching, marching, we battle, too, for men— For
they are women's children and we mother them again.
Our days shall not be sweated from birth until life closes— Hearts
starve as well as bodies: Give us Bread, but give us Roses.

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient song of Bread;
Small art and love and beauty their trudging spirits knew— Yes,
it is Bread we fight for—but we fight for Roses, too.

As we come marching, marching, we bring the Greater Days— The
rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler—ten that toil where one reposes—

² Helen Todd, *The American Magazine*. Crowell-Collier Publishing Company. 1911. p. 619.

But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses.³

Luke concludes with the question, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? Indeed, as long as “Bread and Roses” is sung in our streets and on the commons – yes, he will find faith. Bread and Roses -- A most glorious, and urgent prayer for our time. Amen.

³ James Oppenheim, *American Magazine*. December 1911, Colver Publishing House. p. 214.