Sermon - The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22) A
The Reverend Dale T. Grandfield
October 8, 2017

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Psalm 19
Philippians 3:4b-14
Matthew 21:33-46

“Our thoughts and prayers are with you…” seems benign enough. Who would’ve ever thought those words could become so charged. I mean, sure - if any of us is honest - those can become thoughtless, empty platitudes. Or words that we use in difficult moments to distance ourselves from real, honest empathy with those who are suffering.

On the surface, at least, that’s why people have reacted so vehemently when tweets and Facebook messages said “our thoughts and prayers are with the victims” of the terrorist massacre in Las Vegas this past week. Do congresspeople and the President really mean that? Do they really mean that they’re praying and thinking of the people lying dead, or wounded and their families and the myriad hands involved in trying to save them? And then there’s the bigger question: does prayer really do anything?

I don’t know - it seems to me rather presumptuous, when someone says they’re thinking and praying in a difficult time, to assume that they’re simply being superficial. It might be better to assume good intent at least.1 But, of course, we don’t live in an age of particularly good will on the national stage, so that response from certain sectors, a loud: don’t you even dare send thoughts and prayers… makes sense within the context; or, from a certain sector of the church, if your prayers don’t translate into immediate action, they’re empty.

It all makes me wonder just exactly what we think prayer is…

Humans are interesting creatures, you know. And we’re particularly interestingly behaved when anxiety drives us: for some, anxiety in the face of the kind of horrifying loss we have all seen this past week is completely debilitating; for others the easiest way is to enter into denial; or to just get on with business as usual. For still others it’s a rush to make meaning, to have answers, to fix it.

This is compounded since, we are a society that struggles to do grief well.2 It’s not productive; it’s emotional, it’s dark and uneasy and not fun… we’d much prefer the fairytale version where everything gets set right in an hour-and-a-half. So, when faced with the direness of our situation, of the pain and

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1 I note that this is one of the ground rules of being able to hold a non-defensive dialogue, and is often one of the first casualties when conflict begins to mount in human systems.
2 “The mourning process in America today is supposed to be brief and private. According to Blauner, “the individualization and deritualization of bereavement” lead to difficulties in adjustment because of ambiguity about the phases of, and behavior appropriate to, grieving and mourning. The lack of social prescriptions concerning mourning and bereavement may result in serious adjustment and recovery problems for the recently bereaved.” in the Institute of Medicine’s “Bereavement: Reactions, Consequences, and Care” (1984).
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK217844/
thorough-going, destabilizing fear of this past week’s events, for example - culturally - we want to either turn away, get over it, or forge ahead with something that we hope will make it seem less senseless.

And that’s just it. I’m afraid there is nothing better to be made of 59 people dead; it is completely void of sense - that is the nature of evil - it is non-sense\(^3\) and the more we try to rationalize with it the more we are stymied and sucked-down in the overwhelming undertow of despair:

But you see, that is precisely why we pray - the platitudes and the emptiness and the unwillingness to enter in be what it may - we pray. We pray because in the face of evil’s non-sense, prayer is literally the only way we can re-touch sense; the sense that lies at the very center of who we are and who we are called to be by the God who alchemizes life out of death.

“Almighty and everlasting God,” we said in the Collect today, “you are always more ready to hear that we to pray, and to give than we either desire or deserve.”\(^4\) God is ready to hear and to give; not in the sense of some magical formula that is going to solve our problems for us! They are our problems and God isn’t our maid to clean up after we’ve made a really bad mess, nor is God our stopgap to keep us from making a bad mess. But in prayer we know God is with us, a healing presence with us. Sometimes God stands, holding the silence when we are addicted to chatter. Sometimes God works to slow us down when we’re ready to jump to conclusions. All the while God is waiting for us to enter in the see with God’s eyes: a vision where there is more to each of us and to us together than the spiraling nonsense of the world seemingly coming unhinged around us...

So, in the pain of Las Vegas stop and feel, grieve for what has happened and what we have become: stop and listen again for God’s word of kingdom peace: where there is no more crying;\(^5\) where we all sit together at banquet;\(^6\) where weapons of war are beaten into farming tools\(^7\) and there is no more hurting or destroying;\(^8\) where the crucified one, bearing the scars stands,\(^9\) brimming with life-impossible that flows out to enliven his entire universe.

And then, for God’s sake pray, pray for you and me, pray for this place, pray for this nation, pray for the world! But let it begin with: Lord, transform me! Make a new heart in me, let me feel, let me love, let me burn with passion for your world - Transform me!\(^10\)

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\(^3\) I borrow this concept from my seminary professor of Moral Theology, Cindy Crysdale who, in turn takes it from the work of Roman Catholic moral theologian Bernard Lonergan who pulls heavily on the Tradition going back to Augustine at least. Lonergan and Crysdale both refer to evil as “radically unintelligible” and “the absence of reasonable action”. See for example Crysdale, “Transformed Lives: Making Sense of Atonement Today”, page 147.

\(^4\) BCP, p. 234.

\(^5\) Revelation 21:4

\(^6\) Isaiah 25:6, among others

\(^7\) Isaiah 2:4

\(^8\) Isaiah 1:9, 65:25

\(^9\) Zechariah 12:10, John 19:37, Revelation 5:6

\(^10\) Note that the Serenity Prayer is worthwhile: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.