

“On Thoughts and Prayers”

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“Praying is always praying with: my mother, those who are suffering in hospitals, people on the streets, people in prisons, human and other beings in the whole world. This form and content of prayer gave me a daily exercise in how to orient my heart.”

– Claudio Carvalhaes, *Praying with Every Heart*

When I was a kid, I played football. Look, I gave it an honest shot, even if it wasn't for me. The team practiced in the park that basically made up my front yard, and it looked like fun. I didn't know the team was attached to a neighborhood Christian community center, but, growing up in the Bible Belt, I was used to most events starting and ending with a Christian prayer, which didn't often sound much like the meditations I heard in the more humanist UU congregation I grew up in.

When practices started and ended, a different teammate would volunteer to give the prayer, all of us huddled and taking a knee. I bowed my head reverently, but didn't quite know whether I should close my eyes or not, so I'd pretty much blink for a really long time so that I could split the difference.

On game days, I'd hear my teammates praying that we win against the other team, who, I assumed, was praying for the exact same thing, but also that each player would stay safe, that we'd have fun, and they expressed thanks and gratitude for getting to be together to play this game. Teammates and coaches would join in with “amens” and “yes, Gods.” Already a skeptic, by this point in fifth grade I'd dubbed myself an atheist, but I, too, was hoping we'd win, that we'd stay safe, and that we'd have fun, and I was grateful to get to be with new friends to play this game, too.

Then, at the end of one practice, on one knee with eyes blinking slowly, my coach realized, “Lindsay, you never pray - lead us in prayer today.” To this day, mind you, I lead worship with a script, and I might move away from it a little, but to the chagrin of mentors along the way, I do not lead extemporaneous prayers as a religious professional, and I was petrified to be asked to as an eleven year old.

I sat in silence, really in shock, and said “I don't think you want me to,” but my coach insisted. After we sat in more silence for a while, he offered, “Just say something and then say ‘amen.’”

So my prayer went, “God...amen.” Coach shook his head a little disappointed and asked another teammate to pray instead, and I think we were all a little relieved.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg writes about “vending machine theology,” where you can “insert deeds or prayer into the divine vending machine and ... expect to get exactly the candy you’re hoping for,” while those who experience misfortune must have put the wrong deeds or insufficient prayers into the machine. But I don’t believe it was my insufficient prayers that kept the Uptown Steelers from winning games; I think it was my lack of skill. But my coach’s words stuck with me -

“Just say something, then say amen.” Or ameen, or blessed be, axe, may it be so, goodbye, thank you, peace.

Claudio Carvalhaes, from our reading, invites a liberation theology of prayer - prayer with. He writes “to pray is to learn how to be happy and have pleasure, but that means shifting from a concept of individual happiness to an understanding of collective joy.” He continues, “prayer is gaining a consciousness of who we are in solidarity with the world we live in and the earth that hosts us...a way of giving soul to this consciousness...of blending consciousness with compassion, action with thinking, emotions with reason, enthusiasm with empathy.”

Though my football team was praying together, we weren’t always intentional about praying with. The assumption that we’d all pray Christian prayers didn’t make space for my budding theology, and I don’t know if others were similarly stifled in the expectation that this ought to fit each of us the same. The prayers I heard to win against another team didn’t ring of solidarity, but they didn’t end there, either. Prayers for safety in fragile bodies in contact sports rang with a recognition of our shared humanity and vulnerability, blending enthusiasm to play well with empathy to keep one another safe.

Prayers to share joy with all players shifted the goal from individual or cliquish concepts of joy in winning against others to collective joy in the fun of the game.

I didn’t try to pray again for a long time - or at least, I didn’t call any practice of mine “prayer” for a while after my sheepish silence. But in seminary, living with an interfaith and ecumenical group of fellow seminarians, I, with my reservations, joined for a weekly prayer time. Living with 20 divinity school students meant I had a lot of conversations about God, theology, and spirituality, and by this point, I knew that each of us who joined for this weekly prayer time had pretty different ideas of to whom or what we were praying.

Each week a different person would lead a prayer inspired by their own tradition, making intentional room for each other to enter into the practice. We knew we'd modify words to fit our spiritual worlds, and we knew what a gift it was to witness authentic spiritual fulfillment in another, even if it didn't personally resonate with ourselves - learning to praying with.

When my turn came around, I still wasn't so used to leading any kind of spoken prayer, so I brought a reading from the back of our gray hymnal and lit a chalice. After lighting it, one of my fellow prayees realized they'd left the oven on in the basement, and asked that we, on the fourth floor, would wait for them to return to start praying - but I remembered the words of my coach, "just say something and then say amen," and I gently told them, the chalice is lit - an invitation that even the journey to turn off the oven and trudge up too many flights of stairs - that too could be prayer. Then, when they returned, I said something, and then said amen.

This month in worship, we're asking what it could mean to ask for help, and to that question this morning I'll add, "how could you ask for help," and "to whom could you ask for help?"

Carvalhaes tells a story of a mother at a pharmacy trying to get her daughter's medications though she doesn't have enough money. She pleads with the pharmacists, and people begin to complain in line behind her. Security ushers her out, without her daughter's medicine, as she prays for mercy. Carvalhaes asserts "her prayers were never answered," and that "the mother's prayer will never be answered if not through us."

He says her prayers will be unanswered until we build an economic system that prevents a mother in her position from ever leaving without her daughter's prescriptions, until we build pharmacies that do not throw poor patients out, until we build communities of compassion that resource mutual aid and solidarity and do not complain for a longer wait as she digs for another nickel in her purse, still \$50 short. Carvalhaes writes,

"Until this woman receives medicine for her daughter, I will never learn how to pray."

In times of tragedy and trouble, I often hear those with much access to great power offer "thoughts and prayers." And then stop.

But as a praying person, I don't buy it - because I really believe that attention with intention through solidarity, what I call prayer, means much more than kind thoughts and hopes to beat the other team.

I believe that prayer is a special kind of attention - an attention to the relationship between our lives and the things of ultimate significance, the relationships we share by our nature of existing on a shared planet.

When we bring our connectedness into prayerful attention, I believe we move closer into solidarity with all those hurting in exploitation, in oppression, in grief and loneliness.

This week, many in my Memphis community are weeping, hearing that the police officers who killed Tyre Nichols will not be held accountable on any charges. Knowing that incarceration and retribution are not the beautiful futures we hope for as we build accountable communities, we weep that a human stopped without probable cause was beaten to death and did not receive necessary medical care until 16 minutes after medics arrived, and we weep because this story is just one in a much larger series of stories of Black people murdered by police who face little to no consequences and who continue to patrol communities under the guise of safety and protection. I hope that we learn to pray. I hope that we pray with communities of resilience and accountability. I hope that we pray with our bodies, as we resist all oppression and exploitation and assert our shared dignity and power. May the places where we are comfortable pray with the uncomfortable, and may we find our prayers in discomfort aided by collective tenderness and solidarity. May our prayers make maps of our resources and move us to live in our values.

May our prayers seek new relationships and alliances in far off places. May our prayers be an accessible prescription, a full tank of gas, and a place to stay the night.

To paraphrase the writer David Harvey, the point is not to understand oppression, the point is not to understand systemic brokenness, the point is not to understand great hurt and sorrow - the point is to change it. May our prayers build communities of changemakers.

Please, the chalice is lit - will you pray with me:

Amen.