

Rev. Andy Nagy-Benson
The Congregational Church of Middlebury (United Church of Christ)
Middlebury, VT USA

Second Sunday in Lent — February 25, 2018
Scripture: The Letter of James 1:27; 2:14-18; 5:13-16

Note: this is the second sermon in a five-part Lenten series on prayer.

THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS

Thoughts and prayers.

“You are in my thoughts and prayers.”
I have said that many times.
I have tucked those words
into hundreds of notes of condolence.

Maybe you have, too.

“You are in my thoughts and prayers”
is not a masterpiece of human prose.

If we say it, we say it because
in the inarticulate shock of loss
we want to express empathy and compassion.

There are other ways to convey this.
But “you are in my thoughts and prayers”
is one way to say,
“I love you” and “I want good for you.”

—

Thoughts and prayers.

When those words are anchored
in the harbor of Christian community
they mean something important.

Something like —
I cannot wash away your pain.
I cannot fix this.
I cannot change the un-changeable.
But I trust that God is with you.
And I will do everything I can
to bear the light of God's love for you
as we walk this valley of shadows together.

—

Thoughts and prayers.

Over the years,
the thoughts and prayers of others have comforted me.
They have upheld me.
They have encouraged me to be of good courage.

—

But lately,
those words have been thrown overboard.

In the past ten days,
in the wake of another mass murder, another school shooting,
I have heard ten times a day:

*Thoughts and prayers don't change anything.
We have to take action.*

—

Well, I'm up for action.

But this cry strikes me
as a very narrow view of prayer.

You see, I am praying for the people of Parkland.
And I am praying for less gun violence in our country.

These prayers are not coins
inserted into a cosmic vending machine.

I don't think
the power of my positive thinking
will bring relief to a grieving community in Florida.

And I don't think
my prayers will magically change the laws of the land.

I pray because I need to be reminded
that I am not a community-of-one.
As Desmond Tutu says, "A person is a person through other persons."
So, for others I pray.

I also pray because I need help
seeing the humanity of leaders
who I find increasingly hard to like.

I also pray because I need to express to God
my deepest hopes and needs and concerns.

I also pray because I believe in a God
who is bigger than the problems we face —
a God who gives us strength to keep going
when we are tired, weak, and worn.

—

So, I get the call to action.
But I could do without the dismissal of prayer.
Prayer is oxygen for my soul.

And let me add —
I don't see prayer as an alternative to action.

I don't think it's an "either-or."
Either thoughts and prayers *or* action?
Since when is this a choice?

Faithfulness has always held together
THOUGHT, PRAYER, and ACTION.

Always.

—

Take the Letter of James.

The Letter of James ends with a swooning celebration of prayer.

“Pray for one another,” he says. (James 5:16)

“Prayer is powerful and effective,” he says. (James 5:16)

But on the way to that little prayer patch in Chapter Five,
James keeps slowing down
in front of unambiguous billboards.

Look — he says —

“Religion that is pure and undefiled is this:

to care for orphans and widows in their distress.” (*adapted*, James 1:27)

Look — he says —

“Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (James 2:17)

—

For 2000 years and still today,

St. James reminds us

to actively work for the good of others, especially those who are suffering,
and to thoughtfully pray for them.

In other words, he reminds us to be the Church.

—

Thoughts and prayers?

Yes, please! Bring them on!

And also cards and phone calls.

And deliveries of food and altar flowers.

And rides to appointments of every kind.

A couple years ago, after my shoulder surgery,
a church friend brought me some homemade chicken soup
with these little balls of bread in there.

It was incredible — so good!

And, it might have had something to do
with the painkillers I was on at the time,
but to this day that soup is the best prayer I have ever eaten.

—

Thoughts and prayers.

When those words are anchored
in the harbor of Christian community
they mean something important.

And they are forever tied to the actions we take,
the things we do,
to show someone we care.

—

But in recent days
those words have fallen flat
in the public square.

The sound of NRA-funded politicians
offering “thoughts and prayers”
after another mass murder at a school is a hollow, hollow sound.

It rings hollow,
because it’s hypocritical to pray for a problem
that you are able but unwilling to resolve. (Miroslav Volf)

And up ’til now,
too many law makers have been unwilling
to make comprehensive, common-sensical laws
to address the problem of gun violence in this country.

So many empty thoughts.
So many performative prayers.
So much lack of action.

If you say your thoughts and prayers are with somebody,
it means you are willing to help them out.

Otherwise, “thoughts and prayers” becomes something it isn’t — something profane.

—

Meanwhile, a growing crowd stands at the gate.

A growing number is saying:
No more intractable thinking!
No more prayer-for-show!
It’s time to act, to reform our gun laws.

I am counted among them.

—

Now, I don’t have it all worked out, that’s for sure.
Gun law reform is complicated.
And I profess no mastery of the intricacies.

But, here’s what I’m thinking.

I’m thinking
I cannot stand idly by
when the spin doctors tell us
that school shootings “are not about the guns.”

I agree that gun violence is not ONLY about guns.
It can be about a lot of things, including:
mental health support;
and the violence on our screens
that desensitizes us to real pain and suffering.

But, to say a school shooting is “not about guns”
is like saying a drug overdose is not about drugs.

It’s just not true.

—

I'm also of the mind
that semi-automatic weapons
in the hands of civilians
do not make us safer.

And that universal background checks
would be helpful.

—

Basically, if the goal is
no more children shot dead in school,
then we need to learn the ways of subtraction
not addition.

The idea of adding guns to our schools
by arming 640,000 teachers nationwide
is not what I have in mind.

—

We can do better by our kids
and by one another.

It's possible.

Our Governor showed us the other day
how possible it is.

Introducing sweeping gun law reform
in a gun-loving State
could not have been an easy thing to do.

But it happened.

It happened because SOMETHING has to happen.
Inaction is not an option.

—

We have a gun problem in this country.

And just because that problem
is embedded in other problems
doesn't make it any less of a problem.

It's time to THOUGHTFULLY act.
It's time to PRAYERFULLY reform our ways and our laws.

—

Thoughts.
And prayers.
And actions.

That's the three-legged race
that runs from generation to generation
in Christian community.

We need all three.
Always.

And for the sake of our children,
we need all three right now.

Amen.