News



People attend a candlelight vigil Oct. 3 in memory of the victims of a mass shooting along the Las Vegas Strip. (CNS/Mike Blake, Reuters)



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October 19, 2017
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Prayer is getting a bit of a bum rap these days, at least when it is tagged on to the end of the platitude most often employed in the face of senseless disaster and heart wrenching tragedy — "thoughts and prayers."

In the wake of the avalanche of natural and human-caused disasters over the past few weeks, the U.S. news and social media have been filled with "thoughts and prayers." Thoughts and prayers for the victims of
Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Juan, Maria and Nate. Thoughts and prayers in response to the devastation wreaked by fires in the Columbia River Gorge and now the Napa Valley. Thoughts and prayers for the innocent lives lost in Las Vegas to gun violence.

There also has been more than a bit of critique of the efficacy and true intentions behind this catch phrase. When politicians whose campaigns have been well-funded by the gun lobby make public statements promising their thoughts and prayers in the face of the latest mass shooting, one is left wondering what it is exactly that they are thinking and praying about.

Some elected officials and political appointees offer thoughts and prayers for lives uprooted by a seemingly unprecedented season of hurricanes, and then, in the next stroke of the pen, revoke clean energy policies which seek to reduce the human-induced factors contributing to climate change and extreme weather. Then there are the thoughts and prayers for Puerto Rico, without corresponding efforts to reduce the debilitating lingering effects of racism and colonialism that severely limit relief and rebuilding efforts for these American citizens.

I recognize the truth behind these legitimate critiques of the intentions behind those in positions of power offering thoughts and prayers in the wake of disaster upon disaster. Thoughts and prayers have been entered into the Congressional record more than 4,000 times by a member of Congress since 1995, which adds up to approximately one offering of thoughts and prayers for each work day in Congress.

Clearly, thoughts and prayers are not enough in response to times such as these, but I hope (and pray!) this does not lead us to dismiss the transformative power of prayer.

You see, I firmly believe that offering thoughts and prayers is a natural and honest response to tragedy, grounded in our vulnerability as a human community. It gives us an opportunity to pause, reflect and tap into some power beyond ourselves. Sharing our thoughts and prayers with people of good will, no matter their faith or creed, draws us together and counters the isolating effects of violence and suffering.

Most importantly, such heartbreaking moments call us to dig into our best intentions and our best selves, and hopefully lead us to be inspired to take action to alleviate and prevent such suffering. For Christians, prayer helps to bring the light of the Gospel to the reality we face. As we say in my community's constitutions:

Recognizing gospel peace as both gift and task,
we believe that prayer is fundamental to our life.
Our intimacy with God
unifies our prayer and activity
so that we are moved to action by prayer
while action urges us to pray.

Thoughts and prayers are good, but they are not enough. If our intention is merely to send good energy into the world, that is not necessarily a bad thing. But I also have to ask myself, if that is all that I am intending, am I letting myself off the hook? Am I simply waiting, hands open, for the gift of God's peace, without being willing to get my hands dirty and take up the tasks that are mine to do, in light of my prayer and in response to God's love? Does transformation only take place out there, outside of myself, or am I also praying that I will be transformed?

These are big questions, without simple answers. Part of the challenge is our understanding of and relationship with God. This is especially true in the messy bits of human life, those most vulnerable and powerless moments when the existence of a puppet-master God, waiting for us to say just the right words in prayer, would be very helpful indeed.

We cry out to God to save a loved one from a terminal illness, and then she dies a long, painful death. Journeying as a young adult with my mother through her cancer was a turning point in my own spiritual life. I hoped against hope, prayed and prayed

that Mom would get better. Over time, my prayers changed from hope that Mom would get better to hope she wouldn't suffer too much. As her suffering continued, worsened and intensified to inconceivable levels, I prayed that her suffering would end soon. And then, I simply stopped praying. I stopped hoping. I just stopped.

When my mother passed away, I could no longer pray. This was a dry time for me spiritually, and yet also a deeply transformative one. Simply put, I was very angry at God. I found solace in the Psalms, especially the ones with a lot of detailed and juicy complaining and questioning, the angrier the better. One day, a wise priest friend of mine helped me to realize that anger is a very intimate emotion. It sounds strange to read these words aloud, but in my sheer anger with God, I grew closer to the source of everything that is good. This was pure gift, and it moved me to action.

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The five-second conclusion of this story is that in the months after we buried Mom, I found myself drawn even more to the work of justice and peace. I sought to alleviate suffering in my little corner of the world. I made connections with others who burned with the same desire. Before I knew it, I began to explore the crazy idea that I might have a religious vocation.

What is they say about being careful what you pray for? Here I was praying for an end to suffering, and I found myself called to do whatever I could to do just that.

God is present through it all, the moments of sunshine and light as well as the times of heartbreak and sorrow. Perhaps the questions we need to ask ourselves honestly are these: Are we present to God and others through the heartbreak and sorrow? We can simply shrug our shoulders and offer our thoughts and prayers, or we can dig in and roll up our sleeves, doing that which is ours to do. We can pray to be transformed, so that our prayer leads to action, while our action leads us to pray.

[Susan Rose Francois is a member of the Congregation Leadership Team for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace. She was a Bernardin scholar at Catholic Theological Union and has ministered as a justice educator and advocate. Read more of her work on her blog, At the Corner of Susan and St. Joseph.]

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