

Chapter 1

PRAYER IN AN ELECTION YEAR: LORD, HAVE MERCY

I remember clearly how I felt on Election Day, 2004. I sat in my car outside the voting booth, still not decided about how to vote. I had read up on the presidential candidates, watched the debates, and talked it over with friends and family. Still, neither John Kerry nor George W. Bush emerged as the clear choice.

I was struggling to put the decision in a faith perspective. I heard many people doing it, simply, with ease. Some were liberal Christians, certain that God would want to banish George W. Bush from the presidency, stop the war in Iraq, and expand funding for social welfare. Others were conservative Christians, certain that God needed Bush to uphold the moral fiber of the nation, foster democracy and freedom abroad, limit abortion, and stop the movement for gay marriage.

As I, a Roman Catholic, looked at the two major candidates, I saw neither perspective completely embodying my values, my faith. I wondered if my faith had much to do with the election. I haltingly tried to pray for wisdom but felt a real disconnect. Did God have a side in this election? Surely—yet neither choice sat well. No clear sign emerged. No lightning bolts flashed. I was sure that God’s purposes aligned with some of the aims of each candidate, but on other issues the fit was murkier. In the end, I made the best choice I could and, on leaving the voting booth, simply prayed: Lord, have mercy.

Although we may not have been publicized as much as the more vocal and more certain voters, I imagine many people of faith found themselves in a somewhat similar position: wanting to relate their beliefs to this practical decision, yet unclear about precisely how faith would direct this choice. Just a bit less sure that God saw politics through the same lens that we did. Just a little suspicious of how others—conservatives and liberals—so easily heard God’s voice.

We believe that our faith should make a difference, that we should be able to connect our spiritual life with concrete issues in the world around us. Yet it can be quite difficult to do so with real thought and fidelity. Complicated social questions may seem simply disconnected from our faith. We often unabashedly make God the spokesperson for our own viewpoint. Sometimes our best efforts to bring a faith perspective to social questions cause division within the communities we hold dear. So, how do we enter faithfully into the events, debates, and questions of public life?

PRAYER AT THE HEART

I want to focus on one aspect of that large question: prayer. Prayer is at the heart of the life of faith. It is a natural part of relating to a God on whom we depend and with whom we are called to intimacy. If we believe God cares deeply about the world, then it is natural also to lift up to God all those conflicts, dilemmas, and struggles woven into our common human life. How, though, do we pray thoughtfully, faithfully, about social and political questions?

You may wonder why I have chosen to focus on prayer. There are, of course, other practices—such as lobbying, volunteering, preaching, and educating—that relate faith to social and political life. Many Christians distribute food to the poor, visit the sick, and give money to charity. Church social action groups join in political protest, lead antiviolence campaigns, conduct voter registration drives, and work for legislation that squares with their religious beliefs. These are important ways to embody faith in our society as neighbors and citizens. Prayer without such action would not be sufficient.

Nevertheless, prayer has been at the heart of Christians' shared life of faith from the beginnings of the Christian community. In his earliest surviving letter, for example, Paul encouraged the Christian community at Thessalonica to persevere in faith. Paul cared greatly for these new converts and expressed joy that they were standing "firm in the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 3:8), living the gospel he had preached to them. They faced persecution, however, and Paul feared his beloved community

would weaken. Prevented from returning to the city, Paul prayed to be with them: “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith” (1 Thessalonians 3:10). As they faced opposition, Paul counseled them to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). In Paul’s eyes, prayer is not limited to discrete moments set aside from the rest of our lives. Rather, he encourages Christians to pray without ceasing and always in a context of thanksgiving. Petitionary and intercessory prayer then flow from that way of living. Paul implored the Thessalonians to pray for him and for his fellow evangelists Silvanus and Timothy. In Paul’s understanding, prayer gave a struggling church strength and wove Christians—even though separated by distance and persecutions—together in bonds of love and shared faith.

Prayer is the glue and the ground for the life of the Christian community. It binds the church together and keeps it centered in the power of the Holy Spirit. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the disciples—who must have been perplexed, amazed, and frightened—gathered in a room in Jerusalem, awaiting the return of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised them: “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers” (Acts 1:14). We see the early community spending much time in the Temple, breaking bread together in their homes, praising and praying to God (Acts 2:42, 46–47). It is this

rootedness in prayer that Paul and his followers desire for the fledgling church. The letter to the Ephesians counsels: “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18–19). Prayer, then, is the first “action” we do for one another. It also expresses who we are. If social action is to spring from and reflect Christian faith, it must be rooted first in our life as a community of prayer.

This does not mean prayer is a private “churchy” practice separate from the larger world. Rather, it is a public practice of a community that is very much in this world, attending to its suffering and seeking to live out the gospel amid the complexities of particular social situations.

A RUNNING REMINDER: BE STILL

Though it may be at the heart of faith, prayer is still not easy. Contemporary Western culture encourages us to be productive, get moving, not waste time. Success is measured by what we do, how much we do, how many hours we put in at work. Prayer can be difficult in the face of these cultural messages. It is countercultural to wait, contemplate, sit still.

When I began teaching at the university where I continue to work now, I arrived after a period of whirlwind activity. I had just graduated with my doctoral degree, moved halfway across the country to a city where I knew nobody, piled my boxes into a bare apartment, and

tried to set up my office. I would be meeting new students and new colleagues, running from one meeting to the next, and deciphering the ins and outs of working on this campus. Instinctively, I knew I needed some spiritual reminder to center me in my workspace. I chose this Scriptural passage: “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). I decided to create a screensaver on my computer with a shorthand message: “Be still. . . .” With great satisfaction, I set up the words in bold red print. I sat back and watched the screensaver, preparing for a prayerful moment. The bold red words *Be still* went racing across my computer screen, over and over again. The running screensaver contradicted its own message! The worst part is, the irony did not even hit me until months later, when I finally noticed the contradiction. I left it as is, because it seemed to deftly point out the difficulty of being still in a running culture, with a running personality.

PRAYER AS PAUSE BUTTON

I have come to realize that even if prayer can seem as though it is slowing me down (what I really want to do is hop into bed, or finish this chapter, or clean up the dishes), ultimately prayer is not in tension with action. It is instead a kind of pause button, so that our action is more intentional, wiser, less ego-centered, and more directed toward God’s purposes. Prayer enables us to step back and gain perspective on all the busyness that otherwise fills our lives.

The Benedictine tradition has for centuries built this insight into the structure of monastic life. In his famous Rule, a guide for monastic communities, Benedict (ca. 480–547) instructs monks to pause seven times a day for prayer. Leaving aside their work, they were to come together to say the Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours, a service of Scripture reading, silent prayer, and singing of psalms. The Rule emphasizes the importance of a regular, balanced rhythm of prayer, work, rest, and study in community. The contemporary Benedictine sister Joan Chittister describes her own experience of this way of life:

It is so easy for good people to confuse their own work with the work of creation. . . . It is so easy to commit ourselves to this century's demand for product and action until the product consumes us and the actions exhaust us and we can no longer remember why we set out to do them in the first place. But regularity in prayer cures all that. Regularity harnesses us to our place in the universe. . . . Benedict called for prayer at regular intervals of each day, right in the middle of apparently urgent and important work. The message is unequivocal. Let no one forget what they are really about.¹

The “pause” of prayer may be particularly important for people who work passionately for social change. David Stevens is the leader of the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland. Corrymeela is an ecumenical Christian community devoted to reconciliation in a country that has seen decades of violent conflict between Protestants and Catholics. Set on the beautiful north Antrim coast, the

community seeks to be a reconciling space, opening its doors to groups of all kinds. It is difficult work, dependent on faith and small glimmers of hope amid persistent sectarian fighting. Reflecting on his own long involvement in this effort at reconciliation, Stevens described prayer as a reminder of hope for social activists like himself. He said that social activists tend to be idealistic and thus chronically depressed, because “politics always disappoints.” Prayer is an important way to “slow down, connect with the transcendent, and recall that we are simply ‘passing through.’ It is not all up to me.”²² Prayer, then, is a kind of humble pause in the midst of even terribly important work, putting our human efforts in perspective, helping to sustain the spirit and endurance of those working for social transformation.

PRAYING THE CONFUSION

Prayer, then, is critical in an engaged life. It is also where we meet some of the most difficult spiritual questions. It is when we try to pray that we face head-on our questions about where God is, who we are, how we can come to know God and God’s purposes. I was recently gripped by a news story about a carload of seven children—as young as twenty months—all killed in a fiery crash in Florida. A fifteen-year-old was driving. A tractor-trailer behind her smashed into the car, pushing it into a school bus stopped in front of her. The car burst into flames and the five adopted foster children and their two cousins died. On hearing the news, the grandfather of the children col-

lapsed and died of a heart attack. The family was left with loss—total, abrupt, incomprehensible loss. It is a deeply troubling story, perhaps particularly awful to me as I am the mother of small children. I have not found it easy or natural to pray about the situation; in fact I have carefully kept the story at a distance. Why? I suspect that I possess no language to put my feelings into words for prayer, and I am hesitant to ask the big questions that would tumble out if I let them. How could this happen? Where was God in this? How on earth will the families of those children live through the pain?

I could pray for those children. I could pray for some measure of comfort and peace for the family. Yet these prayers seemed to keep a lid on the underlying, heartbreaking question: How could this happen? There are many events posing such questions, even more pressing in situations where suffering results from intentional human action (a husband murders his wife and child, a woman is raped, terrorists commit mass murder). There we are forced to wonder what evil is in human beings. How do we make sense of the awful things that people do to one another?

The gospels clearly invite us to bring our requests to God. The Lord's Prayer is filled with petition ("give us this day our daily bread . . . forgive us our debts . . . rescue us from the evil one"; Matthew 6:9–13). In the gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches the disciples this prayer and then directly tells them a parable about a person roused from sleep in the middle of the night by the persistent knocking of a friend who requests bread. "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives,

and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Luke 11:9–10).

Still, if we pay any attention to what is happening in our world, we may find ourselves wondering whether God does intervene in the course of human action or natural events. Does petitionary prayer make any sense? In fact, many people today, given our extraordinary exposure to events happening across the globe and our science-oriented mind-set, understandably question whether their prayer matters. Does our prayer actually change God’s mind, drawing God to act in a way that God would not otherwise act? Or does prayer at least transform us, calm us down, foster compassion, shape our action? These are tough questions.

We also face the problem of discerning God’s will, not in generalities but in the particularities of concrete situations. It is one thing to affirm that God desires justice and dignity for all. It is another thing to be specific about what that means in any particular policy debate, be it about foreign policy or stem cell research or abortion. Deciding how faith leads to a certain course of action becomes complicated. Our understanding of the facts of the situation may be incorrect or incomplete. We may not accurately predict the consequences of how we act—what will happen if this person gets elected, or this law gets passed, or this program is put in place. Choices are often messy, with no pure moral option. On top of all this, discernment of what God wills is by its nature a humble, complex process prone to self-deception and the limitations of human knowledge.

I suspect that prayer fully engaged with the social and political events of the world challenges our theology, rais-

ing questions we may want to dismiss with easy answers or compartmentalization of spirituality away from the “world.” But there in the mix of both conviction and confusion, our prayer is most real and earnest. There is, I think, a place for praying the confusion. The Reformed theologian and pastor Karl Barth, for example, composed this pastoral prayer: “Remain unchanging, O God, both above and in the human actions and events of our days, so confusing and confused, oppressing and oppressive.”³

This book does not answer those deeply troubling questions about theodicy, about how a loving and all-powerful God can permit evil to persist in the world. Nor does it provide a simple answer to how one discerns God’s will. It leads us into those questions as they emerge in real practices and life situations. It shows how some Christians have tried to pray their way into and through those questions, seeking to live faithfully and continue praying amid persistent suffering, injustice, conflict—and, still, hope. In walking with these stories, readers are invited to enter into those same questions in their own lives.

ENTERING INTO THE STORIES

As we enter into these questions, we will try to tease out more specifically what makes integration of prayer and social action complex in practice. Stories of communities in a number of contexts help us look at actual practices of prayer rather than simply discussing the topic as an abstraction:

- A congregational church in Florida erupts in conflict over the outspoken politics of its pastor, opening up a debate about how spirituality and politics should relate in the life of a diverse faith community.

- South Africans try to pray in the face of relentless injustice, and church leaders wind up in a painful controversy about how to pray for political change. At a funeral to bury four anti-apartheid activists, people lift up their voices in grief as they raise their fists in defiant protest against the government; then, as the nation turns to a new future, some turn to prayer as they struggle with the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation.

- In the dusty fields of California, Cesar Chavez and the Mexican American farm workers he led weave traditional spiritual practices such as fasting, pilgrimage, and celebration of the Eucharist into a savvy campaign for economic justice. The integration draws support but also questions about the line between authentic prayer and political campaigning, and about the place of spiritual practice in an increasingly pluralistic movement.

- When prolife supporters bring their prayer to the streets in the current day, they are sometimes lambasted for hurtful and threatening displays of piety. Prolife and prochoice supporters both pray, but the vast differences in their prayer inevitably push questions of truth while their deep divisions lead us to consider how healing might come to the body.

- Then, from the calm hills of Burgundy, France, the ecumenical Taizé community invites us to be still. Taizé offers another model: prayer itself as the witness

and mission, not for the sake of some social aim but as the core of a life of faith. It is a story that, particularly seen alongside the others, brings us to wrestle anew with the relationship between contemplation and action in the Christian life.

I urge readers to step into these stories, to imagine yourselves there in those contexts, and to wrestle with the dilemmas the people faced. The stories are like case studies, deliberately open-ended so that you can live in them and consider how you would have acted, walking in those shoes. In the process, you may bring your own questions to the stories, reflect on your own beliefs about and practices of prayer, and open yourselves to new ways of praying.

I have intentionally chosen some examples that may not be close or familiar to some readers; they are drawn from a number of countries and times. Sometimes we can see things when we step back a little from our own situation. Each story opens questions and insights—about how to keep praying through injustice, how to authentically make our prayer a social witness, how to discern the fine line between presumptuous and prophetic prayer, how to relate contemplation and action, how to pray as a community amid great diversity. We get a glimpse of the power of these people’s experience and the depth of their spiritual dilemma.

At points in each of the chapters, I introduce resources from the Judeo-Christian tradition, guidance in the practice of prayer. Chapter Two starts us off by framing our discussion of prayer in dialogue with three streams of the

Christian spiritual tradition: the desert fathers and mothers, Ignatian spirituality, and the mystical writing of Teresa of Avila. Even though volumes have been written on prayer (and I do not attempt any kind of comprehensive overview), these three glimpses into the tradition highlight the centrality of prayer in the Christian way of life and its deep connections to humility, discernment, and action. At the same time, the glimpses reveal the ambiguity of the tradition when it comes to relating spirituality to a life deeply engaged with the world. Too often, prayer has been taught as a practice that requires disengagement from and devaluing of the world. In effect, this book is an invitation to draw deeply from the wells of the Christian spiritual tradition while also creatively engaging—from the perspective of concrete contemporary spiritual dilemmas—those places of silence or misguided counsel.

We may have forgotten, or not known, about some of the wisdom of the Christian tradition when it comes to prayer. In some cases, we have to connect traditional resources and our own contemporary questions, drawing out implications of, for example, Ignatian teaching on discernment for the social and political decisions that we face in our own contexts. Sometimes we need to “speak back” to the tradition and forge another way of appropriating it. I want to emphasize that my discussion of resources is by no means intended to be a quick fix or to pose an easy answer to the dilemma individuals and communities face in integrating prayer and public living. Rather, I aim to bring their practices and those very real dilemmas into dialogue with voices and witnesses within the tradition. I also want to shed light on how their own practices might

be relevant to the wider Christian community in differing contexts.

OPENING UP CONVERSATION

My hope is that this book will stimulate conversation, reflection, debate, study, clarification, and renewed practice. Let me emphasize that the book seeks to open up a conversation, not close it down with premature or easy answers. The questions, insights, and practices discussed here need to be considered within varied ecclesial frameworks and social contexts. Christians share a belief that the Bible must guide our discernment about social questions, but we interpret the Bible differently. We also draw upon tradition, reason, and experience in our own ways as sources of truth, illuminating our understanding of the Scriptures. I hope, then, that this book will be a resource that sparks reflection and more faithful practice within the particularities of varied Christian communities and unfolding social situations.

In addition to reflection and conversation, we need models, inspiration, teachers who can lead us to more faithful ways of praying and acting in the world. The communities and individuals that appear on the pages of this book may fill those shoes. We may find ourselves walking with companions who disturb us, inspire us, guide us. We may find ourselves opening up to new ways of praying. Certainly, one does not learn to pray simply by reading a book. Prayer is an encounter, a relationship that

is eminently personal and unique to each individual. We learn to pray by praying; there is a great deal of truth in that. Yet we can also find ourselves blocked or stuck. We do not know how to pray. Or we pray in ways that only reinforce false and damaging understanding of God. Here is where we can benefit from guides that show us another path. We also benefit simply from recalling that we are part of a wider community that is seeking to be faithful. We may differ in what that means, but together we gain from wrestling within the community.