

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 11.12.17

Scripture: Amos 5:18-24

Matthew 25:1-13

Thoughts and prayers. We had another week of abundantly proffered thoughts and prayers. While we, last Sunday in worship, were setting on our minds on the opioid crisis, a congregation in Texas, also in worship, had imposed on it another of our social ills. A 26-year-old white wife-beater shot up a worship service in order to get to his once mother-in-law: domestic violence brought to a house of God.

He shouldn't have had a gun. His violent past should have made getting a gun impossible. But the system failed because the people who were supposed to use the system didn't use the system; the Air Force didn't make a formal entry into his record of the bad-conduct discharge he was served. It was a sort of discharge that would have prevented him from owning a gun.

Apparently it happens a lot that military officials don't enter into the system the very information that's helpful in cases like this one. I have no idea why.

Twenty-sixth people died, a tenth or so of the town.

Thoughts and prayers. The governor of Texas proffered these. Senator Cruz, Speaker Ryan, Mike Pence, and the Trumps Donald and Ivanka, among countless others, tweeted their offers of thoughts and prayers.

Twitter has become something of a monster in our public life. Now, everyone who qualifies in any way as a public figure is expected to tweet his or her reactions to the major events of the day—because not to tweet amounts to expressing a *lack* of care, concern, engagement, investment. To remain silent about sobering news is to reveal your apathy. But so much that's been happening in recent weeks—in recent *days*—defies common commentary, defies the form that's too silly in its name. "Tweeting" about a mass shooting feels like writing a limerick about the Holocaust. The form doesn't fit the called-for function.

No matter. It's compulsory at this point.

Of course, this is a weird social pressure that presses not only on famous people, but on any and everyone who has a social media account. This week alone I felt a sort of

responsibility to post on Facebook about (1) a mass-shooting, (2) an alleged sexual harasser of underage girls running for the Senate, (3) a renowned comedian whose sexual come-ons are in league with Harvey Weinstein's, (4) another renowned comedian whose joke about the Holocaust was wrong-headed, (5) Trump "chatting" with Putin in Vietnam, (6) a tax bill from the House that's good at least for big corporations, (7) some surprising victories on election day that give me at least a modicum of uplift, and, finally, the once-again proffering of thoughts and prayers and/or the pushback against all those thoughts and prayers.

This is how the script goes now, as you likely know. The tweeted outpouring of thoughts and prayers prompts an evermore-insistent response against such thoughts and prayers. The assumption behind this is, at its most generous, that thoughts and prayers are nice and all, but what we need is policy, action. And, make no mistake, the meme machine has been in high gear with this pushback. Do even a cursory search and you can find a meme that makes thoughts and prayers seem either facile, or stupid, or offensive, or ridiculous, or hypocritical, or cowardly, or any number of things, but always, always failing to rise to the level of seriousness that policy-proposals would represent and might actually be.

The problem for someone like me is that the way thoughts and prayers have been so casually invoked suggests that everyone sort of believes this is true. Even those claiming to have engaged their thoughts and prayers have done so with a level of casual one-offing, or smug self-assurance, that it calls into question the seriousness of their thoughts and prayers.

I mean, first of all the phrase: it's tailor-made for our thrashing, hedging age, so convicted are we and at the same time so cynical. The whole notion of sending someone your thoughts is a spin-off of holding someone in prayer. But prayer assumes a third party and this presents a problem because not everyone believes in that third party. The one doing the praying is obvious enough, the one who is the subject of the prayer is plain to see, but that third party, the spiritual reality who "hears" the prayer and perhaps even responds to the prayer: that's a deeper question and not everyone shares the same answer.

As it happens, and as I hope doesn't surprise you, I "believe" in that spiritual reality, which is to say I have experience of it and I trust it. I experience it as the center of being—

my being and all being, the being-ness of all things, that still point around which all things are organized and toward which all things are drawn. Thus, it *holds*. I experience it as bearing intelligence and wisdom, and as being responsive and even interventionist. I pray in terms of “Father” when we’re together, as in keeping with our tradition and with how Jesus taught his disciples to pray. But on my own I tend simply to address this “Father” as God. That is, when I use words at all. Often I don’t; often it’s just wordless yearning or desperation or hope or unfettered happiness. (See, wordlessness can actually indicate not apathy but deep engagement.) And most often I pray in my bed, when I’m at the edges of the day—the crack of dawn or the coming-on of night and sleep, when my critical mind is in communion with my roving, semi-conscious mind.

But, of course, a lot of people don’t have that sense of a spiritual reality that holds and understands. A lot of people take those things to be ours alone to do. To hold the world in mind so it makes sense (at least a little bit of sense) and to understand it in terms that can get you through, surviving its slings and arrows: this is an exclusively human activity, and moreover one we can each really only do on our own. You come into the world alone, you die alone, and you’ve got to figure it all out on your own. There is no transcendent reality holding it all together, granting it origin and end, sustaining it through being, and redeeming it amidst suffering and waste. That is yours to do or to surrender to the surety that no one’s doing it because it can’t be done.

A third option, I suppose, is to seek out and surrender to a demi-god, a god of politics. Someone who can use politics in service of “salvation,” someone who can save of your group against rivaling groups and otherwise outsiders: atheism and authoritarianism are handmaids of one another.

I imagine, then, it’s to accommodate such an agnostic, if not atheistic, worldview that this phrase, “thoughts and prayers,” came into currency. It would actually be an interesting study to do—to find when praying became modified by thinking. There would be a lot of data to sift through. Twitter and social media in general have compelled a lot of data for future historians to consider.

Sorry about that, future historians.

But maybe I’m being too literal. It’s just strange to me that the most proudly pious among us are willing to go there. These people who object to saying “Happy Holidays” in

deep December: they're willing to send thoughts out into a world not too sure about prayer.

But what I more deeply object to is that I doubt very much the veracity of their prayer.

That's a pretty harsh thing to say, I realize. Who am I to judge other peoples' relationship with God? That's like judging other people's marriages: some things you just can't see to decide on except from the inside.

The thing I wonder about, though; the thing that I measure it against: it comes to me from Amos.

Are you, ye thinkers and pray-ers out there, ever undone by your approach to God?

That was central to Amos' prophesying to the people Judah, a people that was pretty sure of themselves. Their worship was theater; their submission to God as sovereign was play-acting. They performed it beautifully, perfectly. Granted, they'd mastered all the right moves and memorized all their lines. But they did it with an underlying assumption that their own success was a matter of self-sufficiency. The reality they'd made of their national life was self-assured.

This is a point Walter Brueggemann makes in his book, *Commentary: Money and Possessions in the Bible*. Of the time of the prophets, he describes both the royal regimes of Judah and Israel, and the imperial regimes of Babylon and Persia, as "committed to economic extraction from the common population to produce surplus wealth for the governing elite, [the who had] arranged the economy for their own benefit." This resulted in "a kind of totalism... [in which] a *process of economic extraction* closely linked to an *ideological hegemony*...produced a closed sociopolitical system." The continued accumulation of power and wealth to those who had power and wealth justified its own process of such accumulation.

This sort of closed system, or totalism: I'd always thought of such a thing as particular to the modern era. On display most especially where totalitarian regimes even advertise themselves as such, socio-political totalism I'd always thought was a creation, if a perverted one, of the modern mind. The aims and claims of the Soviets, of the Nazis, and even still of official North Korea: I'd always thought this compulsion toward a hermetically-

sealed reality was an idea to spring from the confluence of modern science, economics, nationalism, and centralized mass media.

But maybe not. Maybe this is something more enduring than just this one era. Maybe this is something essential to being human, something that inheres in our living this wild life, a wildness we cannot actually tolerate. So we perhaps claim a belief in an interventionist God, we even claim the *favor* of this interventionist God, but the truth is that we either doubt such a God, or we hope that such a God will search our highly-managed system of socio-politic-economic order and will judge it pretty impressive and will then leave it alone or will better yet deign to it, be domesticated by it, and bless it as good. Or we, one of us will, aim to *become* such a god.

As it is now, so it was apparently then, a couple centuries after David had ruled as king and established the borders and order of the United Kingdom Judah-Israel, after Solomon had ruled as king and established the Temple and its cultic practices, governance, and hierarchy. Building on their stabilizing foundational leadership, this royal regime, two centuries, three centuries, rose higher and higher, wealth and power extracted from the people to accumulate up and up, a self-sufficient, self-justifying system that professed the sovereignty of God but lived very much as if sovereignty was the regime's alone.

Four centuries in, it certainly *seemed* to be.

Amidst this system of totalism, though, emerged some prophets, "voices from elsewhere," Brueggemann considers them, "from outside the totalism, sounded with immense authority that defied and displaced the authority of the regimes with the claim of the authority of the creator God who rendered all other authority penultimate."

Amos was the earliest such voice to emerge. He called out chapter after chapter the "unseemly self-indulgence of the leisure class," their tendency to "trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain." Eventually, though, he got around to calling out their smug pretense at piety. All their worship, all their festivals, all their solemn assemblies: these did nothing to bring the people to actual humility, to cause the people to submit to the sovereignty of God and to the righteousness of his will that the poor be lifted up into what Brueggemann helpfully calls a neighborly economy. None of the approach to God actually involved submission, awe bordering on fear. Their approach to God was always incredibly self-assured.

Amos would very much have had it be otherwise.

And as to the Day of the Lord, as to that coming time when the Lord would to arrive among to the people, to overwhelm their being (*our* being) and to fill to bursting (their constructs (*our* constructs), the people apparently proclaimed a facile hope. Assuming as they might have done that the world as they'd made it was very much as God would bless it to be and for being, they talked of the coming day of the Lord as if things would for them not change much or perhaps go from good to great.

Amos, though, connected the dots to make a very different picture. "Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion and was met by a bear." Amos anticipated for this self-assured people that the day of the Lord would be gloom, not bright—and because the world as God will surely fashion it wouldn't (and won't) serve the same purpose as it did (and does) with the powerful having fashioned it. It would, on the contrary, be a day of reckoning, a day of thoroughgoing correction.

I have to say I can't always get with Amos's way of understanding how God's presence is felt. I'll admit my approach to God is usually done in a spirit of hope for calm rather than fear of disruption. It probably more consistently resembles the facile festivals of a comfortable people than it does the desperate prayer of the poor. The sorry fact is that I seldom sense God's coming or God's assured presence as a devouring attack. And I think this is mostly to the good, mostly right. God is often felt to have said to a trembling person or people, "Fear not." Jesus is often felt to have been a compassionate, kind presence, and amidst a brutal, cruel, dehumanizing world.

Yes, God is good.

But Amos here has got a point. Really, given my common prayer, done from the comfort and felt safety of my bed, I *do* appreciate the reminder that God, in all God's power, should not *only* be felt as soothing, as a domesticated pet like one my dogs curled up around my sleepy prayer. God should also be remembered as a wild, fierce animal.

To feel God only as someone I keep in my back pocket or bedside table drawer: this is to be pretty arrogant about how I'm doing in this life.

Thomas Jefferson is remembered to have said, "Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." The wider quote, though, is less remembered, less known. I looked it up. It's from *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XVIII, in which Jefferson wrote of

chattel slavery, which we *must* remember is at that foundation of our society. "For in a warm climate," Jefferson wrote, from balmy Virginia, "no man will labour for himself who can make another labour for him. This is so true, that of the proprietors of slaves a very small proportion indeed are ever seen to labor. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever . . ."

Jefferson was wise to tremble, as we are at times wise to tremble. God's sovereignty isn't something to be casual about or too comfortable with, and easily cast into doubt when we act as if it's not *quite* true.

As to whether violating God's will brings about God's wrath or simply makes the resurgence of God's justice that much more painful for it violating our structuring which we conveniently call just, I can't say for certain. I can say, though, what Christ reveals to my discerning mind: that God isn't wrathful, is but just. Yet we are creatures mired in sin, who build a life together that, though perhaps aiming to be good, is yet not good, is sometimes compromised with evil. God's justice, therefore, might well *feel* life wrath. When you put back into place a dislocated shoulder it's perhaps as painful a thing as you can imagine—but not because the doctor doing the procedure is wrathful.

Really, we'd be wise to tremble.

I've never been close to obvious power, but I've heard people speak of their experiences of such a thing. I've heard journalists testify to an experience of interviewing the president or being in the Oval Office. To hear them speak of it, it's intimidating even to the most seasoned. It's unnerving even to the most wizened wise. This is part of what was so upsetting about the picture to come out of a visit to Trump's Oval Office of Sarah Palin and Kid Rock. Their coarse manner suggested they had little notion of what the presidency is actually about, and what sort of reverence and care we hope to find in the person who occupies that office and the people then allowed in.

So much more is this the case, then, when it comes to the Lord of creation. How could you possibly approach such a Lord in worship without taking stock of yourself, your worthiness and righteousness? Really, if prayer and worship most often comfort and

sustain us, or energize and commission us, they should also from time to time make us weep for who we really are, chastened for our failure to live as God intends, individually and perhaps more so as a people, as a nation that purports as an aim freedom and justice for all.

I don't understand how lawmakers who claim to pray can, when it comes to gun violence, emerge from their prayer lacking a commission of what now to do. We have elected them to legislate for the sake of our common good—to remain vigilant as regards freedom and justice for all. And it's tricky. I get it. It's tricky to figure out where my freedom can express itself given your freedom to do the same. It's tricky to envision what justice actually *looks* like. These are serious questions, and in lots of cases the stakes are high.

Mass murders, gun violence, a thing that happens here in our society on a scale that no other society comes close to experiencing, strongly suggests that legislation is now crucial. And that legislation might well begin in prayer—in deep, serious, fearsome prayer; in a total submission of the self to God's sovereign will and insistence upon justice; the sort that you can't tweet about, that you can't *send* out but that you must let *in* to work its wordless persistence on your weasel-y soul. Yes, a legislative response to the sort of shooting our society suffered last week might well start in prayer. I actually hope it does. But any prayer that doesn't compel some faithful response from our most pious legislators I'll be Amos enough to say I don't think counts as prayer.

So please, please, stop calling it that. You're making us look bad, and you're misrepresenting the God whom we claim is power and glory and sovereign of all.

This is the God for whom we wait, lamps lit that the coming day might be bright in a way we welcome. This is the God for whom we wait, ferociously good, and fiercely insistent that we aim and work to be as well. Those whom we've elected to seats of societal power must now set themselves to the tricky task of legislating for a common good, not in service of some abstract ideology, not in service of moneyed interests like the gun lobby or the NRA, but in service of the people they represent—we the people.

We're dying in numbers, and in a way, that should bring our country to shame, and that can be a good place to start.

Thanks be to God.