

Embracing the World
Jeremiah 29:10-14, John 17:20-27
March 29, 2009

Jim Wallis, the founder of the Sojourners movement, writes about listening to his children's bedtime prayers as one of his spiritual disciplines. Despite a schedule so busy that he often conducts interviews during taxi rides, Wallis tries to be home each night to put his two sons to bed.

Some nights the practice is easy—like the night Luke, an avid baseball player, thanked God for making him a switch hitter.

Some nights the practice is more difficult, as when Luke, struggling with the newfound knowledge that children die each day of poverty and disease, brought up the issue with God. He said, "Dear God, I pray those children don't die again tomorrow." Then there was a long pause before Luke continued, "But that is unlikely."

There was another long pause, and Luke went on, "Dear God, I pray then it would be their best day ever. But it won't." Finally the child came to the meat of the matter. "Dear God, please help us to stop this from happening."

Luke's precious prayer is one of lament. It is a prayer of the heart borne of compassion and despair. It is the voice of our common humanity, uttering our shared grief and anguish at things that have gone terribly wrong. It is a bold and honest expression of truth, in the tradition of the Psalms.

Most of the Psalms express the raw emotions of life experienced by people drawn to the edge of life. Some situations are beyond our ability to cope and act, driving us to declare our distress and sorrow to the Holy One. When life has gone beyond our frail efforts to control, the Psalms offer language to express ourselves.

Listen to some of the utterly honest expressions from Psalms of lament.

"I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint;

My heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast;

My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,...

You lay me in the dust of death." Psalm 22:14-15

"Every night I flood my bed with tears;

I drench my couch with my weeping.

My eyes waste away because of grief." Psalm 6:6-7

"My tears have been my food day and night." Psalm 42:3

"My enemies trample me all day long, for many fight against me."

Psalm 56:2

Sometimes we can relate to these prayers of despair. As young Luke was aware, these are the daily prayers of too many people around the world whose salty tears are their only food day and night. Thousands feel trampled by enemies out to seize their homeland and run them into exile. We offer prayers of lament on behalf of our human brothers and sisters around the world who lack the safety and resources that we enjoy daily and take for granted.

Biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann says that “Psalms of lament are powerful expressions of the experience of disorientation. They express the pain, grief, dismay, and anger that life is not good.”ⁱ These are prayers for times of crisis. Sadly many in our nation are crying out such laments these days. The losses are accumulating – jobs, money, homes, health care.

When life knocks us off our moorings, it is perfectly acceptable to be honest with God, to express our anger at senseless violence that claims the lives of innocent victims. In the face of injustice, when some are issued bonuses while many are given pink slips, God receives our lament.

St. Teresa of Avila was a sixteenth century mystic who felt so close to God that she was willing to express all her thoughts and feelings in her intimate relationship. One dark night, she was traveling through northern Spain to the site of a new monastery. A fierce storm came upon her and her traveling companions. The wheels of the wagon got stuck in the mud, halting all progress. Teresa climbed down from her perch into the pouring rain, raised her face and her fist to God and shouted, “If this is the way you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few!”ⁱⁱ

Something healing happens in the honest expression of our grief and anger. In sharing the anguish with God, the burden is shared. In naming the source of our distress, some of its power is diminished. We begin to die to the old situation, the old possibility, the old false hopes in order to move forward. In the naming and leaving behind, we are freed to receive the newness of life that God has to offer.

All of the Psalms I quoted earlier end in expressions of hope and new life:

“God did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him....

The poor shall eat and be satisfied.” Psalm 22:24, 26

“The Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.

The Lord has heard my supplication; the Lord accepts my prayer.”

Psalm 6:8-9

“By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,

and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.” Psalm 42:8

“You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle....

For you have delivered my soul from death, and my feet from falling,
So that I may walk before God in the light of life.” Psalm 56:8, 13

The diet of tears is transformed into a banquet table to feed the hungry. The enemies bent on destruction are met by the God of justice who provides for the weak. The one who feels trampled is raised up from the pit to stand in the light of new life. It is not magic; it does not happen overnight. However, the gifts of renewed strength, assurance, and hope carry us forward into the future.

The prayer of lament is one way in which we can embrace the world with our love.

Another way in which we can embrace the world in prayer is through prayer for our enemies. Jesus commands us, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). This is not an easy command to follow. We are more likely to ignore or avoid it. Perhaps we don’t want to give the impression that we condone what our enemies have done if we pray for them. We may not be ready to let go of the hurt, pain, and anger we feel, and the desire for revenge.

The Aramaic word commonly used for “enemy” in the Bible means “someone with whom we are out of step.” People with whom we are out of step. Given this definition, we might identify persons who have different values or perspectives than we do. Moving from our personal world to the global community, we can easily name enemies: rulers who steal money from their people, governments that imprison and torture people who disagree with them, those who sell women and children into prostitution, suicide bombers and assassins, heads of corporations who care only for money and not for the welfare of their workers—these are among the enemies of justice and peace.

In my prayers for victims of oppression, I naturally find myself drawn to pray for the elimination of the sources of injustice, for the perpetrators of crimes, and for transformation of institutions that treat people inhumanely. I recognize that unless the pain of the perpetrators is healed, they will continue the cycles of violence that cause such destruction. To stew in hatred of our enemies gives them power over us and blocks the transforming power of God to change the situation. Opening ourselves to forgive the enemies and release them from the chains in which we hold them bondage, frees both us and the enemy to be impacted by the renewing Spirit of God.

Elias Chacour is a Palestinian Christian peace worker. He wrote of his father’s words to his family after soldiers had destroyed his livelihood: “‘Children,’ his father said softly, turning those sad eyes upon us, ‘if someone hurts you, you can curse him. But that would be useless. Instead, you have to ask the Lord to bless the man who makes himself your enemy. And do you know what

will happen? The Lord will bless you with inner peace—and perhaps your enemy will turn from his wickedness. If not, the Lord will deal with him.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Night after night, Elias would hear the words of his father’s prayer: “Forgive them O God, heal their pain. Remove their bitterness. Let us show them your peace.”^{iv}

Prayers for our enemies do not mean that we condone unjust behavior. As Martin Luther King Jr. taught, “Praying for one’s enemies need not lead to a quiescent politics; such praying reminds us that one may contend sharply with the unjust enemy yet still leave him room to turn around.”^v Prayer for our enemies brings mercy and hope for transformation to places of tyranny, war, and oppression.

In the face of the multitude of issues facing our world, we can often feel hopeless and paralyzed. We wonder what difference the actions of one person can make. As we unite our actions and our prayers, we can make a difference. God will use our energy and respond to our prayer, transforming the world one step at a time, one person at a time.

Judaism has a concept called *tikkun olam* which informs our prayers for the world. The idea begins with the understanding that God withdrew into himself in order leave a space for the world. However, God did not want to leave the world devoid of his presence. He sent forth rays of his light, but the light was too intense for its containers. These vessels broke, scattering fragments of light throughout the world. It is the task of humans to gather up these fragments, wherever they are, and restore them to their proper place. In this way we bring healing to a fractured world.^{vi} Through our prayers and our actions we seek to rescue fragments of the divine light which have been lost and scattered. We pray in order to mend the fractures in our broken world, to restore divine light to its rightful place in humanity and in our relationships.

Prayers of lament for the condition of brothers and sisters around the world and prayers for the enemies of goodness are ways in which we can participate in gathering the fragments of light which have been lost in our darkened world. May we lovingly embrace God’s world in prayer.

ⁱ Walter Bruggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary’s Press, 1982), p. 29.

ⁱⁱ Jane E. Vennard, *Embracing the World: Praying for Peace and Justice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), p. 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House Company, 1984), p. 62. Quoted in Vennard, *ibid*, p. 25.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p. 49.

^v William F. May, “Liturgy for Life,” *The Christian Century*, 2001, 181(24), 28. Quoted in Vennard, *ibid*, p. 28.

^{vi} Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), pp. 74-75.