

Thoughts and Prayers?

Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
Pullman, WA
June 5, 2022

Jesus rebuked leaders who used prayer as a moral cover for systemic injustice.
—Mika Edmondson

Ancient Witness: Amos 5:21-24

These are the names of the 19 children and two of their teachers who were murdered at their school, Robb Elementary, in Ulvalde, Texas 12 days ago by a gunman with an AR-15 assault rifle:

Makenna Elrod, 10
Layla Salazar, 11
Maranda Mathis, 11
Nevaeh Bravo, 10
Jose Flores Jr., 10
Xavier Lopez, 10
Tess Mata, 10
Rojelio Torres, 10
Eliahna “Ellie” Garcia, 9
Eliahna Torres, 10
Annabell Rodriguez, 10
Jackie Cazares, 9
Uziah Garcia, 10
Jayce Luevanos, 10
Maite Rodriguez, 10
Jailah Silguero, 10
Amerie Jo Garza, 10
Alexandria “Lexi” Rubio, 10
Alithia Ramirez, 10
Irma Garcia, 48
Eva Mireles, 44

These mass shootings happen with sickening, numbing regularity. In 2020, there were 611 shootings where four or more were killed or injured. In 2021, there were 693. And before a man killed 4 people at a hospital in Tulsa this past Wednesday, there had been 231 mass shootings so far this year.

And with many of these mass shootings, the gunman used a semi-automatic assault weapon such as an AR-15 with a high capacity magazine. In addition to Ulvalde, Tulsa, it was also used at the Buffalo mass murder where 10 people were killed at a supermarket. This type of weapon was also used at Sandy Hook Elementary School where 17 children were killed; at a nightclub in Orlando Florida, where 49 died; at a high school in Parkland, Florida, where 17 students lost their lives; at a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, where 26 people were murdered. The list goes on and on.

In 1994, congress passed an assault weapons ban, making guns like the AR-15 illegal. When it was instituted, there was a significant decrease in mass shootings, and when the law expired 10 years later in 2004, mass shootings tripled.

And there has been a public theological conversation among religious and non-religious people this is happening right now that I would like to join this morning. After these latest horrendous massacres of innocent children and adults, there came the predictable press statements and tweets from politicians and leaders, lifting up their “thoughts and prayers” for the victims and the families. Senator McConnell of Kentucky issued a new variation, saying that he was “horrified and heartbroken.” Senator Ted Cruz said he was “fervently lifting up in prayer the children and families in the horrific shooting in Ulvalde.” Now, the shooting happened on May 24, and only three days later Cruz was a featured speaker at the NRA convention in Houston.

And people have begun to react strongly against this “thoughts and prayers” response. On social media, you will see statements such as, “We don’t need thoughts and prayers; we need policy and change,” and “Thoughts and prayers without action are lies and deception,” and “Actions speak louder than thoughts and prayers.” People are seeing through the “thoughts and prayers” response, and they are angry. And I don’t blame them. No wonder many people have stopped going to church!

And it occurs to me that this reaction that is bubbling up is actually a theological critique. Like Jesus, these folks are saying, “Look, if you really mean it, if you really are praying for an end for this gun violence, you would *do something* more than just pray. You’d *do something*. So we see these public statements as empty, performative words.” Like Jesus, these folks are calling out such use of prayers as hypocrisy.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus challenges those who make a public display of their thoughts and prayers, saying, “Go into your inner room and pray in private, you hypocrites. Don’t make a public show of it.” (Mt. 6:5-6) And in the gospel of Mark, Jesus speaks of those practicing these public pious acts, saying, “They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.” (Mk. 13:14) Enabling violence toward others is bad enough, but there is something especially heinous when it is glossed over with a display of devotion to God. No wonder Jesus was so angry at them. Mika Edmondson, a pastor and theologian in my hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan, said, “Jesus rebuked leaders who used prayer as a moral cover for systemic injustice.”

The writer of the book of James warns his readers that “faith without works is dead.” Those who make public profession but do nothing are lost. Prayers without action is meaningless. It is worse than meaningless, because it can serve as a moral cover for doing nothing. Prayer should always accompany action, not be a substitute for it.

Look, I’m a Christian pastor. I’m pro-prayer. We should do more of it. But first, it should be done privately and with humility. And second, authentic prayer is always accompanied by a willingness to act. If it is used as a cover for inaction, better not to pray at all.

And many non-religious people are seeing right through this. One recent popular Facebook post says, “Prayers are dangerous. Prayers are a way for people to convince themselves they’ve done

something when they've actually done nothing. Prayers seem to absolve people from taking responsibility of demanding change... Prayers ensure that the problem will persist.”

I think this is actually a theologically astute thing to say. Often prayer does function this way, as a way to avoid the struggle and not engage it. Too often prayer simply blesses the status quo and doesn't lead to social transformation and the coming of God's kingdom on earth. And I agree that prayer alone doesn't change external circumstances, causing God to intervene and change the natural course of events. Prayer, it seems to me, isn't about changing God. God is already aware, already loving, already present and already offering comfort and strength and wisdom. Rather, prayer is about changing the one who prays. So if you're not willing to be changed; if you're not willing to be sent on a journey; if you're not willing to follow God's call to love and live sacrificially; if you're not willing to do something, then you're really not ready to pray. In the fourth century, one of the church fathers, Basil the Great, said, “I know many who fast, pray and demonstrate every manner of piety, so long as it costs them nothing.”

I heard another theologically astute observation. One Representative quoted the Bible and asked for prayers on social media, and someone responded to him: “Jesus would want you to use your power as a lawmaker to act and to stop gun violence instead of quoting Bible verses and taking money from the NRA.”

The National Rifle Association has changed through the years, and it has become a vocal opponent of any and all gun control legislation. And it has given millions and millions of dollars to members of congress for its agenda of unfettered and unregulated access to guns. And there are many evangelical Christians who give their blessing to this effort, such as Tim Lee, James Dobson and Franklin Graham, who speak at prayer services sponsored by the NRA.

Shane Claiborne, a leading religious writer, said, “It's been said that idols are things that we are willing to die for, kill for, and sacrifice our children for. By that definition, I think guns would have that sort of unreasonable dedication.” And he asks, are we going to follow Jesus or the NRA? Because you cannot serve two masters. And the gun and the cross are two very different versions of power.

In our spiritual tradition we are guided by a higher vision. According to the prophet Isaiah, this is a vision where people will say,

*“Come, let us climb the mountain of the Holy One,
that we may be instructed in God's ways
and walk in God's paths.”
And they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks.*

This is not some crazy, utopian vision. Because we have evidence that this, in fact, works. Reducing the availability of weapons and controlling guns is evidence-based and effective at helping to stop the carnage. The United States has the loosest gun control laws in the world and the highest rate of gun-related homicide. By far. Of the 23 wealthy counties, gun murder rate in the U.S. is 20 times higher than the other 22. The gun murder rate is 30 times higher than the U.K. and Australia, and several hundred times higher than Japan. What we see is that the tougher the laws, the less guns and the less violence and death.

Australia is an interesting case. After 12 mass shootings in a decade, the pro-gun Conservative, John Howard, pushed through an ambitious gun control program. They banned all automatic and semi-automatic weapons, instituted strict licensing rules and started a buyback program where 650,000 weapons were voluntarily handed in and destroyed at the cost of \$360 million.

So, there are countless examples of actions this nation can take, reasonable restrictions, such as required liability insurance for all gun owners, the same kind of requirement we have to operate cars. And of course, rational control measures do not take away everyone's guns any more than motor vehicle laws take away cars.

Religious displays without meaningful action sent Jesus over the edge, and they caused God's anger to burn red-hot, too. The prophet, Amos, spoke for God, saying,

*"I hate, I despise your religious festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies..."*

*But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-rolling stream."*

One could paraphrase this for our modern ears,

*"I can't stand your thoughts and prayers,
and your prayer services sicken me..."*

*Instead, may new laws and policies be established
and may meaningful actions accompany your fine words."*