

Luke 17: 20-21 + I Kings 17:1-8

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The kingdom of God is within

Roy W. Howard

When Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you."

Given all the forces of evil arrayed against the human community right now, it may be jarring to focus on this saying of Jesus that points toward the inner life, where God abides.

Among other things, it's a summons to pray - to pay close attention to the movement of God within you. And prayer has come under fierce criticism in the days after another horrific massacre by a deranged man with an assault rifle. In the midst of heated rhetoric about Islam, homophobia, Christians and guns, several people took offense at repeated calls for thoughts and prayers. They are offended because "thoughts and prayers" are mere empty gestures that are not going to do anything to change the reality of gun violence spreading like a deadly plague across the country. When your very life is under threat simply because you are gay, lesbian, transgender – something I can't fully experience any more than I can experience what it is like to be Mexican, Muslim or anything else other than a white man – it is understandable to criticize sentimental calls for moments of silence. They seem weak if not insulting to those who are under deadly threat for being who they are. I get that.

After the Orlando massacre Congressman Jim Hines, a Presbyterian Elder, said, **The Moments of Silence in the House have become an abomination. God will ask you, "How did you keep my children safe"? Silence.**

I agree with Congressman Hines, my fellow elder.

The problem is that moments of silence are not equivalent to acts of prayer. I stood among folks at the ballpark last Sunday afternoon holding a beer in one hand and hat in another as the announcer called for a moment of silence for the victims of the Orlando massacre. It was a respectful remembrance but I do not believe it was 35,000 people at prayer asking God to give us the courage to change our ways, console the grieving or truly intervene in our lives. That's the problem: a moment of silence is not necessarily an act of prayer. **Silence is easy. Prayer is not.**

When the reporter asked the congressman if he rejects prayer. Hines answered: **I would never denigrate prayer. It's important to people; it's important to their spirituality. It's not enough. It's not enough. Prayer did not stop Orlando. It did not stop Newtown. It did not stop Aurora. It did not stop San Bernardino. Clearly, more is called for from us.**

In Jesus' time people were curious and, some zealously passionate, about when God's reign would fully appear. Such a full presence will signal the end of pain and sorrow. There will be no more tears; injustice will give way to just peace and mercy. The passionate want to know when and where this kingdom is present. I understand the desire. Martin Luther King, Jr. and countless others have cried with the Psalmist: how long Lord, how long? In response to the question of when the kingdom will arrive, Jesus points toward the reign of God that is already present within, right now. Other translations say, *among you* right now. Jesus seems to be saying, while you are looking around out there – how about stopping to attend to God within you.

While the Roman Empire was engulfed in debauchery and falling apart within and without, a band of Christians started wandering off into the desert to practice solitary prayer and sustain a spiritual life they believed impossible under the current state of moral decline. When they sat in the desert alone, away from those corrupting influences, more than one testified that the forces they faced within themselves were as mighty and horrible as the outward forces they fled. Patricia Cornwell is a writer of detective thrillers who also happens to be a graduate of a Presbyterian theological seminary. About her writing she says, ***"A lot of components go into creating a monster. Cruelty, savagery, callousness. Do we all have that in us? I suspect we do. We can all do pretty bad things if we don't pay attention."***

Jesus says to pay attention to the kingdom of God within us. Why? When we truly give ourselves to prayer – **to knowing ourselves before God** – we confront forces like anger, hatred, jealousy, envy, bitterness, fear, self-loathing that lead to acts of violence against our neighbor. This prayer – seeking God within us and among us – is not the sentimental act of silence that leads nowhere and is affront to victims. Prayer is an act of faith and courage, and our loving God awaits us to enter that space.

Karl Barth, who with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other Christians who resisted mightily the Nazification of the Church and society, once said: ***"To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of the great uprising against the disorder of this world."***

Nowhere does scripture suggest that attending to the kingdom of God within is an alternative to faithful Christian practice in the world. Jesus himself practiced a rhythm of prayer, silence and public action. He regularly went off by himself to attend to God, not to escape, but so that he would engage the world soaked in prayer.

How might you attend to the kingdom of God within? Would you dare to clasp your hands in prayer – risking yourself to be part of a great uprising against the disorder of this world? Prayer is the great antidote to fear. It is the path to love. And God knows that is the path we need to be on right now.

*In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

