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Weavings



How do we Pray when we are Divided?

by Stephen V. Doughty

SELDOM HAVE I HEARD anyone ask this question. Not as directly as it appears here on the page. Not this squarely. Perhaps a dozen times in the past thirty years, but that has been it, and in a way I should find no surprise in this. I need look no further than my own behavior to see the pattern. When dealing with divisions that slice through the community of faith, at the very moment I most yearn to ask, “How shall we bring this into prayer?” I tend to fall silent. The reasons for my reticence are several, and I expect I have not been alone in yielding to them.

The question itself is prosaic. To ask it out loud is to admit that we are in a place we do not want to be. We would far rather deal with loftier wonderings. “How can I open more fully to you, O God?” “What is the next phase of my journey with you?” “How shall I serve?” or more broadly, “How shall our community of faith now give itself for you?” The very tone of such questions uplifts us. To ask how to pray

in relation to our divisions is to acknowledge that we are, in fact, traversing a terrain more rough than elevated.

To ask, “How do we pray when we are divided?” is to acknowledge a need we would rather not admit. The entire field of conflict resolution has burgeoned over the past twenty-five years. Whole battalions of us have studied techniques for addressing conflict, attended seminars, read books, even achieved certification as conflict managers. Still our communities of faith fracture. To ask how to pray in the midst of our divisions is not to deny the importance of what we have learned. It is, though, to confess that what we have learned has not been enough.

To ask, “How do we pray when we are divided?” is to wait. We must wait while we search out an answer to the question. Then we must wait still further as we open to where the prayer may lead us. And we know full well that in our culture waiting goes wholly against the grain, especially when it means living with discomfort. We would rather deny the presence of the whole pain-giving situation. Let us just pretend the division is not there. Or let us say, “It is behind us” or “It is not that important.” Or let us busy ourselves with matters that give the illusion we are moving on. Let us do anything but wait. All of which means, “Let us do anything but take time to pray seriously over the situation.”

Yet our hearts consistently speak a different message. The desire to bring conflict into the place of prayer persists even if we do not name it. It asserts itself in grief over the spirit-wasting divisions in our parishes, in our wider communities of faith, in our denominations. It pulses through yearnings to see wholeness return in arenas where right now we experience little more than endless debates and open wounds. It sounds in muffled sighs that say, “There must be a better way.”

And amid all the avoidance of the question, in spite of the denial, certain persons are daring to ask it. Through their struggles, they offer answers. Their answers are as down-to-earth as the question itself. In this I sense that they are being utterly faithful to the Galilean who once opened the eyes of a blind man with nothing more glamorous than earnest prayer mingled with dirt and spit (John 9:6-7). Healing, it appears, can forever come through the most mundane channels, and I catch the unaffected answers of these folk with gratitude.

BEGINNING WITHIN

AS HUMANKIND ENDURED the horrors of World War II, poet Marianne Moore sensed a capacity to harbor within herself the causes of war and wrote, “There never was a war that was not inward.”¹ At virtually the same moment Douglas Steere, in his now classic *On Beginning From Within*, noted that true reformers start their work not by denouncing society’s wrongs but by attending to their own need for transformation.² Those with the most to teach about praying in the midst of division incarnate the insights of Moore and Steere. They begin within. They do this whether they are a conflict’s grieved observers, its wearied participants, or its “managers.” I have never seen any one person employ all of the following prayer practices in a given situation. I am not at all sure this would be necessary. What matters absolutely, these persons show us, is where we start. And over the years I have seen faithful folk offer the following:

Cleansing Prayer

Many years ago I sought the wisdom of an older woman whose gentle efforts to follow the gospel had, with clocklike regularity, led her into places of severe conflict. She told of a simple practice. With a phrase that acknowledged her own need, she called it “cleansing prayer.”

She took half an hour for the practice each morning. She would come into quietness and then let arise within her all the pressures, all the tangled situations, all the personalities, all the feelings she struggled with and all the uncertainties that lay ahead. Then, after drawing together the whole weltering mass, she would release it into God’s greater grace. She would pray for cleansing from any bitterness growing within her, for openness to God’s correction, and for sensitivity to the presence of Christ in all persons she would meet during the next hours. After describing this process, she did not go on to say what I and many others saw—her life remained both honest and healing in even the most difficult situations.

Centering Prayer

The recovery of Centering Prayer has come as a great gift to the wider community of faith in recent decades. To grow still in the Presence, to speak no words there, to chase no causes or concerns, is a blessing. To know the Presence dwelling within is a grace quite literally beyond expression. Such prayerfulness knows no immediate utilitarian intent, and yet in the paradox of God’s working, it is eminently useful. When asked what enabled him to remain rooted in God during times of severe church conflict, a respected colleague of mine quietly answered, “Centering Prayer, particularly when things are at their worst.” Beginning within, he lived from the source of all steadiness and through time helped others find that source as well.³

Prayer Shared With Another

As we live amid the strain of conflict, prayerful time with another can become a rich means of beginning within. In the most tangible fashion it reminds us that we are not alone. It opens us in the very places where we most need the restoration and redirection of our spirits.

I confess I first learned the importance of such prayers not because I sought them but because others offered them to me. Seeing my overreaction, another would say, “May I pray with you?” In response to my poorly disguised fears, hands would reach across the short distance between us and take my own. The prayers spoken on such occasions came sometimes from the other person, sometimes from me. Nearly always the words were few. “O God, give calm.” “Restore the larger view.” “Let me listen!” “Wisdom, O God. Grant wisdom.” The simple cries poured forth. Nothing more seemed needed. In time, cherishing the gift of such prayers, I have learned to invite them.

Prayer For Persons With Whom We Are In Conflict

When we pray for people with whom we are in conflict, we open a channel through which God will work fully as much within us as within the wider situation. Such prayers are never easy. We may be able to do nothing more than name certain individuals and place them in God’s care. Even this can be difficult, particularly if they have hurt us deeply or brought great pain to others. “If your wounds are too great

and you have no desire to pray for the other,” a seasoned retreat leader once told a group of us, “do not force your prayer, but still pray. Pray that someday you may attain the desire to pray for that person.” To pray to “attain the desire to pray for that person” is to invite God to work in the deepest places of our lives.

PRAYER IN COMMUNITY

THOSE WHO PRAY in the midst of division do not, however, confine themselves to an interior focus. As essential and life-giving as that focus remains, they show that prayer in relation to division is ultimately a matter for the whole community. Again, their actions suggest rich avenues to follow.

Communal Silence

Sometimes the invitation to prayerful silence arises spontaneously. A wise leader senses the need for it. Positions have hardened. Communication channels are clogged with phrases being repeated for the seventh and eighth time. Good, solid folk are coming undone. The gentle are exhausted; the intense ready to snap. “Let’s just take time together in prayerful quiet. Walk about if you wish. Or stay here. Whatever is most natural for you.”

Sometimes the invitation to quietness is planned. Everyone knows an issue coming for consideration will be rough. So the agenda calls not just for “a moment of silence” but for a genuine time of prayerful quietness before the body votes on the difficult issue. Or after the vote is announced. Or at certain times during debate. Or, following a different pattern, a group may agree to enter quietness regularly for a period of months in order to listen for any themes of consensus that may be growing among its members.

Prayerful silence in community does not of itself produce unanimity. It does, though, free us from the tight confines of our own debates. It draws us into a far larger place. And there, in a manner that is both deeply private and thoroughly communal, it lets us be present to One who is attending on us all. When we return from such silence, time and again it happens: we have not just been refreshed; we have, together, been stretched by the greater wholeness that has met us.

Communal Intercession

Perhaps out of fear that “saying something will only make matters worse” we tend to shy away from including our fiercest divisions in times of communal intercession. We pray ardently for the healing of global conflicts and racial strife, and we should. When it comes to the divisions that afflict our parishes and denominations, such open prayer is more the exception than the rule. This is so even when a debate has just been raging in the narthex.

Some years ago a friend taught me to be both open and specific in public prayer over our divisions. Assigned to preach in a badly split parish the Sunday after the dismissal of its pastor, he drew the whole festering situation into prayer before the congregation. “I was bewildered. I didn’t know what else to do.” So when it came time for leading what the bulletin referred to as “The Prayers Of The People Of God,” he openly acknowledged the brokenness. He prayed God’s gift of wisdom for the whole congregation. He prayed that all have a sense of God’s presence, both in their current distress and on the long, difficult journey towards healing that lay ahead of them. He

prayed for the former pastor and his family. He prayed for all others feeling wounded, injured, and misunderstood, which included just about everybody. “I was stunned at the strength of the response,” he told me. “After the service so many said open prayers were exactly what they needed.”

And no, that body of people did not come together instantly. As I watched their three-year return to health, though, and as I witnessed the vibrant life that ultimately came forth from them, one thing was plain. They began their movement towards wholeness, and continued it, on a level we in the wider church too often ignore.

Two Fasts

Fasting in the midst of conflict does exactly what fasting has always done. It creates an empty space where we can grow more aware of God’s leading.

“We will do this for a year,” a colleague wrote of his community’s decision to set aside a regular day for abstaining from solid food. For his divided fellowship this was a penitential act. All members were undertaking it in acknowledgement of their need for greater wisdom. It was also a profound testament to their deeper unity amid issues that threatened to tear them apart. What this body dared embrace was the first of two communal fasts particularly appropriate to times of division.

The second fast relates not to food but to action. In a community as intimate as a parish or broad as a denomination, members agree to abstain from taking any action on divisive issues for a fixed period of time. The fast will mean nothing, of course, if members simply use the time to shore up their own positions. If, however, the community enters the time prayerfully, if members steadily listen to one another, if they honestly seek God’s greater direction, then the question “What action shall we finally take when the fast is over?” no longer stands alone. Joining it are declarations of “Here are the new elements we all are learning.”

Prayer for Sensitivity to the Movements of God’s Grace

The movements of God’s grace in the midst of communal conflict are often subtle. They generate no headlines. In our division-obsessed age, they rarely even give rise to rumors that something hopeful is happening. Nevertheless, when a clear definition of issues starts to replace confusion, that is a movement of grace. When one side begins to understand the genuine fears, desires, and gifts of the other, God’s healing grace is active. This is so even if the two sides remain far apart in their views.

I am convinced that wherever we live with division in our communities of faith, we need to pray for sensitivity to the movements of God’s grace among us. And whenever we see such movements, we need to name them and give thanks. We need to do this not to engage in some simplistic act of looking on the bright side. We need to do it in faithfulness to the One who has said, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isa. 43:19)⁴ and again has said, “See, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5). To pray that we be sensitive to the movement of God’s grace is to look squarely into the pain of our own divisions. It is to ask that precisely in this pain we may discover how the Loving One is forming us anew.

“Forming us anew”—the simple phrase draws us back full circle. Quietly, it provides the foundational answer to the question with which this essay began. “How *do* we pray when we are divided?” We are to pray, in whatever manner we may do it, with the openness that will allow God to form us anew. We are to pray with the openness that will let God form us within, form us in community, form us through time. We are to pray with the honesty that admits our brokenness and with the

humility that acknowledges we shall never heal by ourselves. In a world that cannot cure itself, and in a church too much weakened and wasted by its own divisions, I can think of little more needed than those humble folk who, with wisdom and courage, right now live their God-seeking answers to the question.

¹Marianne Moore, final stanza of “In Distrust of Merits” from the 1944 collection “Nevertheless” in *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (New York: Macmillan/Viking, 1967), 138.

²Douglas V. Steere, *On Beginning From Within* and *On Listening To Another* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964 reissue of book first published in 1943), 43f.

³For more on Centering Prayer, see M. Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Prayer Form* (New York: Image Books, 1982).

⁴Scripture references are to the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

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