



# Renovaré BOOK CLUB

## Thoughts, Prayers, and Action

By Tish Harrison Warren

E.B. White famously said, “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.” The tension between “saving” or “savoring” the world is one I feel deeply. And in our Christian community, I see a resonate tension between a life of advocacy and a life of contemplation.

We separate our public and active lives from what we see as the private, spiritual activities of prayer. But prayer—both as a community and individually—is, in some sense, always a public act because prayer draws us into the mysterious reality of the God-of-all.

In an excellent essay for *Comment Magazine*, Theologian Kristen Deede Johnson writes about how prayer and our public lives—the world of work, institutions, politics, and society—are part of one another: “As we pray, we are in communion with the God who is at work making all things new (Revelation 21:5) .... This is why prayer is never a private act .... The trinitarian reality of prayer means that every act of prayer connects us to the One who is Lord of all and longs to see his reconciling love transform every nook and cranny of this broken but redeemed world.”<sup>i</sup>

Furthermore, the work of prayer (even in solitude) is a public work because it participates in the communion of saints. Each time we pray or worship, we join God’s work through the global and historic church and, as the Anglican liturgy says each week, we join our voices “with angels and archangels and with the whole company of heaven.” Johnson explains, “When we worship and when we pray, the Spirit is further forming us in our identity as kingdom people who follow the call of Jesus to seek first the kingdom of God. The Spirit, who was sent by the Father to help us and teach us (John 14), will help us see God’s vision for this world, where God is at work making all things new, and how we can participate in God’s very public reconciling work in this world.”<sup>ii</sup>

We can struggle with how prayer and human action—and how working, watching, and weeping—are intrinsically part of one another. So, we then divide our communities into those focused on internal, spiritual formation and those who are activist advocates for societal and political change.

A common example of how this plays out in our cultural conversation is the debate around the phrase “thoughts and prayers.” “Thoughts and prayers” has become a cliché. Stereotypically, politicians tweet promises of “thoughts and prayers” for victims after school shootings or unjust violence, but do little else to change policy so that we have a safer society. Whether fair or not, “thoughts and prayers” has become a byword for inaction.



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Of course, offering “thoughts and prayers” could indeed be a cop out—a nod toward lament and compassion that bolsters apathy and props up the status quo. And yet, in our hyper-activistic, hyper-political, social media-fueled age, we can also, at times, seek to move so quickly from tragedy to solution that we are tempted to act without the wisdom that only comes through waiting, weeping, and watching. And, yes, thinking and praying.

We need all three: hard, informed thought; faithful, dependent prayers; and meaningful, courageous action.

And as E.B. White mentions, this does sometimes make it hard to plan the day.

All of us, in our own contexts with our own limitations, struggle to know how to fight evil and alleviate suffering. The connected world of the internet often makes this struggle more difficult. Marva Dawn explains that we live in an age where we become what she calls LIARs—we have a “Low Information to Action Ratio.”<sup>iii</sup> We constantly take in almost endless information about the vast suffering and horrors of the world, but can do very little in response, so we are trained through habit toward inaction.

There was a time, not long ago, when the average person would hear little about tragedies happening outside their own town or region. However, when he or she heard of a need, there was often immediate action that a community could take to respond to evil or loss. Generations before us had far less access to information, but they often (not always) had a higher capacity for action in response to what they knew—a higher information-to-action ratio. In this way of life, loving our neighbor is not an abstracted idea but an embodied reality with an actual neighbor, with a proper name and a face we know. If someone found out that the McKenzies’ house burned down. They knew them, where they lived, and the ages of their children. They can then bring food, clothes, money, and invite the McKenzies to stay in their home.

We now live in a time where with the touch of a button we access almost endless stories of tragedy, injustice, and suffering world over. But with so much information, I’m paralyzed. I don’t know what to do to actually help all of these many people and complex causes. I can give some money to a fund. I can support a particular political policy, but the truth is, we all know of far more global suffering than we can meaningfully respond to actively.

Yet, we live also in a hyper-activist age, an age in which we are told that we must be constantly advocating, speaking truth to power, or getting involved with various forms of collective action. The consequence of this is community paralysis, in which we actually do less and less (other than argue online) while making more and more noise, generating more and more rancor and outrage. We find ourselves in this way increasingly isolated from the people around us and moving further from embodied relationships and places, our particular ‘neighborhoods of chaos’ in which ministry actually happens.



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In this place of paralysis, prayer offers us a place to begin. We can pray for those around us and for the broader suffering we find in the world, trusting that God will guide and lead us into the active work he is calling us to embrace. Johnson gives this beautiful advice: “Go into your room, close the door, and engage the world.” We don’t leave behind the complex world of injustice to simply savor God, but neither do we frenetically take up works of advocacy and social care without the deep life of silence, stillness, and prayer that feeds, shapes, and determines this work.

Johnson continues, “This means that when my son and I pray in the privacy of our home, our prayers have social import .... [They] have social import because we are praying to a God who is Lord of the entire universe and whose reconciling love in Christ is moving all things toward unity.” We savor God and join his own work of saving the world. After all, it is his world alone, and his power alone by which any of us think or pray or work.

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<sup>i</sup> Kristen Deede Johnson, “Go into Your Room, Close the Door, and Engage the World,” *Comment Magazine*, September 1, 2017. <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/go-into-your-room-close-the-door-and-engage-the-world/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Marva Dawn, *Is It a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church’s Children* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 182.