

“A Praying Congregation: Soulful Spaces”
1 Thessalonians 5:15-24

Prayer has taken a central place in the public sphere recently. With the sudden collapse of Buffalo Bills player Damar Hamlin, prayer became a unifying force to bring people together in a time of great fear and sadness. Here is a visual of what happened on the field that night of the 2nd of January of this year: <https://youtu.be/i8Z2TAxvqVw>.

There were several remarkable things that happened that evening, despite the tragedy. Here are a few of them:

- People stopped being rivals
- People brought their hearts together without having to agree on what prayer is
- People were open about their vulnerability and pain
- There was a sense of unity of seeing each other as one human family
- The football field was transformed into a temple

I am always amazed at times like these when we experience something tragic. At the heart of each of us, there is this deep connection to the divine, to others, and to all of creation. But we often live separated from that sense of connection because of the walls that go up in our hearts as we grow up and experience hurt or loss. Prayer is God's way of reconnecting us to who we truly are.

One of the challenges that faces our prayer is that we often don't know how to create safe spaces for our souls to be present. In his book *Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer writes, “In this culture, we know how to create spaces that invite the intellect to show up, to argue its case, to make its point. We know how to create spaces that invite the emotions to show up, to express anger or joy. We know how to create spaces that invite the will to show up, to consolidate effort and energy around a common task. And we surely know how to create spaces that invite the ego to show up, preening itself and claiming its turf! But we seem to know very little about creating spaces that invite the soul to show up, this core of ourselves, our selfhood.”

The scripture that came to my mind about this is from Paul's first letter to the churches in Thessalonica chapter 5 verse 19: “Do not quench the Spirit.” Paul wrote to give the new converts both instruction and encouragement in their trials. There was a lot of pressure in that city on the church to conform to the norms of power and competition in their society. This was a city that had a very dominant Imperial Cult where the worship and adoration of the emperor was very important. The followers of Jesus in Thessalonica were trying to be faithful and one of the things that gave them great hope is the belief that the return of Jesus was imminent. They just needed to hold on a little longer and things as they knew them would end. The way they understood the teachings of Paul was that Jesus was coming back literally before any of them would die. But several of them had died and it seemed that the delay in the physical return of Jesus was making them fearful. What if they got it all wrong? What if this second coming was not going to happen in their lifetime? These must have been tough questions for Paul to answer because the expectations of

the people were getting in the way of their ability to connect with God and with one another.

Paul reminded them of the basics of following the way of Jesus and that doing those things is the only way to live with hope in times of uncertainty. One of the things he prescribes to them is to give thanks in all circumstances. Even though their expectations about the timeline of the return of Jesus were bringing them down, they needed to be reminded that the only proper response was to continue in a life of prayer without quenching the Spirit.

How do we normally quench the Spirit? Jane Vennard notes that “we can behave in ways that bring a sense of danger into a group. We may ignore a comment offered by someone. We may discount it with statements such as: ‘We tried that and it didn’t work.’ ‘Our church is not ready for that.’ ‘That would cost too much money.’ All those statements may be true, but offering such a response to a creative suggestion serves to make the one who offered it feel wrong, discounted, or excluded.”

How do we create spaces for the Spirit to flourish in our lives? Jane Vennard invites people to remember a time when they felt safe in a group and to remember what made the experience safe and welcoming of the soul. When I ask people about this, their answer is often associated with being listened to without judgment. Vennard puts it this way, “To become a praying congregation, everyone must be free to share their deepest hopes and fears to reveal what is most important to them...Unfortunately, fear of judgment may keep many people from sharing their exciting experiences of self-discovery and spiritual explorations in church.” Then Vennard suggests that we start supporting each other on the journey of prayer by asking, “How was your prayer this week?” Think of the anxiety such a question produces in us. Why is that? I invite you to consider this week finding one person and inviting them to join you on this journey of prayer of six weeks to ask this question together once a week while promising to not judge yourself or the other about how you are doing. If you have a small group that you can share with, that could work too. We will take a moment of prayer to allow a name to come up for you.

Breath prayer listening to a part of Psalm 23 as translated by Nan Merrill. We are invited to memorize a part of it each week. This week we are invited to use a part of the psalm for our breath prayer, repeating it several times each day. “O my Beloved, you are my shepherd, I shall not want. You bring me to green pastures for rest and lead me beside still waters.”

O my Beloved, you are my shepherd,
I shall not want;
You bring me to green pastures for rest
and lead me beside still waters
renewing my spirit,
You restore my soul.
You lead me in the path of goodness
to follow Love’s way.

Even though I walk through the
valley of the shadow and of death,
I am not afraid;
For You are ever with me;
Your rod and Your staff,
they guide me,
they give me strength and comfort.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of all my fears;
you bless me with oil,
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy will
follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the heart
of the Beloved
forever.