Church as prayer

Isaac S. Villegas

When we get together at Chapel Hill (NC) Mennonite Fellowship, we pray: the worship leader invokes the Holy Spirit with an opening litany, another person offers a congregational prayer on our behalf, the preacher prays before the sermon, various people speak joys and concerns during an open time of sharing, and finally the worship leader returns for a prayer of benediction before we depart. There are, of course, other aspects of our worship, but everything we do fits into the category of prayer: collecting tithes as offering our work to God's service, singing as combining our voices in a corporate prayer of gratitude and praise, the Lord's Supper as a *eucharsiteo*—a giving thanks—to God.

Church is for us a corporeal prayer. We pray for the world, for the church, for our community, for ourselves; we pray against the insidious powers of sin and death in all their manifestations. There's so much to pray against, and for.

And our sermons, at their best, are invitations into God's Word, conversations in which we learn God's language as we speak it and hear it, a labor of communication, our struggle to discern the God who speaks in, with, through many voices, the one from the pulpit and the others from the pews who add their own insights during a time of open sharing, a communal wrestling with God's Word made breath, which means a wrestling with the expressions of fellow worshipers as we offer our collective words as prayers: "May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts," I often pray before a sermon, "be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer."

We pray. That's what church is for us, a corporeal prayer. We pray for the world, for the church, for the needs in our community, in our neighborhoods, in our homes; we pray for ourselves, for family and strangers, for friends and enemies; we ask for the

peace of Christ and the comfort of the Holy Spirit; we pray against oppression and violence, against sickness and depression, against the insidious powers of sin and death in all their manifestations. There's so much to pray against, and for. "We pray for those who have lost hope and for those who have gained hope this week," I remember one church member, Rebecca Buchanan, praying.

With our petitions we confess our faith in the sustaining presence of God's grace, of God's life among us, the Holy Spirit drawing us into the body of the Son. "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit," we read in 1 John. In our prayers, our spirits resound the Holy Spirit; worship becomes a lyrical mash-up of the human and divine. Our "acts of worship, petition and thanksgiving," writes Hans Urs von Balthasar, "are borne along and remodeled by the Spirit's infinite and eternal acts, in that ineffable union by which all human doing and being has been lifted up and plunged into the river of eternal life and love."[1] Von Balthasar offers these comments as a reflection on Romans 8, where the apostle Paul describes the Holy Spirit as the one who prays with us, in us, and through us. The Spirit of God breathes through us as we pray, enlivening us, drawing us into eternal life and love, into the life of God. In our worship, in our prayers, we are brought into an ineffable union as the Spirit moves among us, within us, re-forming our disparate lives again and again into the body of Christ, "flesh of Christ's flesh and bone of his bone," as Menno Simons wrote.[2]

The Spirit of God breathes through us as we pray, enlivening us, drawing us into the life of God. In our prayers, we are brought into an ineffable union as the Spirit moves among us, within us, re-forming our disparate lives into the body of Christ.

The body of Christ takes the form of a body at prayer, the church, as it gives itself over to the possession of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who knit together the flesh of the Son in Mary's womb.[3] In prayer, we yield ourselves to the Spirit who now weaves our lives into the identity of Jesus Christ, the one whose life is an embodied prayer, a ministry that calls on God to redeem and restore, to inaugurate an era of healing and salvation, of peace. According to the Dominican preacher and theologian

Herbert McCabe, prayer is not one spiritual discipline among others that we can see in the example of Jesus's life. "He is not just one who prays, not even one who prays best." Instead, McCabe continues, "he is sheer prayer."[4] Jesus lives out a prayer for heaven to fill the earth, a prayer against the demonic forces of hell that ravage creation. His preaching and healing, his walking and speaking, all that he says and does, comes together as a single prayer for God's will to be done. "Thy will be done," we hear Jesus say in the garden of Gethsemane as his hope for heavenly life on earth is threatened with violence and death, threatened with crucifixion.

This is the moment of Jesus's life that I am drawn into during worship at Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship. Church, for me, is the body of Jesus in prayer, there in Gethsemane, staring with horror into the overwhelming violence, and refusing to escape from the suffering of the world. In the garden Jesus invites his friends, he invites us, into his posture of vigilance. "I am deeply grieved, even to death," Jesus says; "remain here, and keep awake." Church is a summons to remain awake to the pain of others, to the pain from which I would shield myself if I could live as I wanted, caught up in routines of work and rest and pleasure.[5] Worship draws me into the passion of Christ as the people at church pray us into the agony of the world, into the pain and sorrow of friends and strangers, into solidarity with the oppressed, into the presence of Jesus—the one who, as Blaise Pascal wrote, "will be in agony until the end of the world"; the one whose afflictions, as the apostle Paul wrote, are completed in the suffering of human flesh.[6]

In prayer, we yield ourselves to the Spirit who now weaves our lives into the identity of Jesus Christ, the one whose life is an embodied prayer. All that he says and does comes together as a single prayer for God's will to be done.

During worship last Sunday, Bradley Yoder shared how, when he opened the newspaper that morning, he saw a picture of children in Gaza, surrounded by gray smoke, surrounded by destruction, terrorized by adult war. "My heart breaks for them," he said as he cried, "Lord, have mercy." As we prayed, as we awakened our spirits, as we turned our eyes to Gaza, I was reminded of Jacob Taubes's description of worship in the early church: "You must

imagine prayer as something other than the singing in the Christian church; instead there is screaming, groaning, and the heavens are stormy when people pray."[7] With Bradley's prayer, among others, we let Christ's life flow through us, a life of protest against the forces of death, a life of cries and groans. We let Christ's agony become our agony, God's pain our pain.

To be afflicted with God's compassion arouses in us the power of hope. Not cheap hope. Not escapist hope. But hope engendered by the anguish of the world as it awakens us to God's pain; for, as the theologian Dorothee Soelle writes, to experience God's pain in the suffering world is to touch "the power of life . . . within pain, which is the biological protest of life against sickness and death."[8] In our prayers of protest, of pain, we feel the life of God flow through our church body, life that sustains our hope: that God will hear our prayers and answer by restoring life, reviving creation, redeeming our world.

At the Lord's Table, we gather for a prayer of protest, which is also a prayer of gratitude. Our words turn into bread and wine as we offer a protest of gratitude: a prayer-meal which invokes the presence of a world of grace, of peace, of healing, of merciful justice, the world of God's eternal and abundant life, a new creation that lives against the torments of sin and violence.[9] Communion draws us into the agony of Christ, the crucifixion, the pulse of God's life for the world, as we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again,"[10] while also inviting us into the presence of the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist"—a reality that nourishes the possibility of hope, our prayerful longing for a world of grace.[11]

Last Sunday John Grose invited us into silence as he always does at the end of his prayer: "And now, O Lord, hear the prayers we offer in silence." As we sit in the quiet of worship, we entrust our thoughts to God and rest into Christ's presence, in the holy silence of the Spirit. I returned to the words of Kate Roberts from early in the service, praying that we would "feel the comfort of Christ with us as we sit together as a congregation, remembering his body through being his body."

Later in the week, the body comes with me as I walk the neighborhood, remembering and praying. "A person is a walking relationship," writes Sebastian Moore, a Benedictine monk.[12]

When I walk and pray, I rest into the relationships that sustain my life, the relationships that are my life—friendship with God and God's family. I focus on the people who shared their prayers during worship: on Kara's uncle, diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease; on Nick, struggling to find meaningful work; on Hannah, as she cares for hurting mothers and sick newborns at the hospital; on the victims of war, especially the communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan that are terrorized by militarized drones; on a visitor, asking for God's sustaining hand for himself and others who live in prison; on Kate, as she sees more doctors this week; on the homeless and hungry in our community, as Cameron reminds us with his prayers every Sunday; on Caren, as the devastating news of her father's prognosis unsettles her and her family.

"Do not be silent," I whisper with an exhale, "O God of my praise."[13] Prayer always leads me into silence as I wait for God's response. "Do not be silent," I pant up a hill, "O God of my praise." The pace of my walk sets the rhythm for my prayer. The psalmist breathes through me; the scriptures inspire me. "Do not be silent," I sigh, "O God of my praise." I do not understand God's silence, but I know of nowhere else to go, no one else to talk to, so I fill the quiet with the psalmist's words again, "Do not be silent." I confess my impatience. I admit that the problem may be with my ears, my inability to listen well.

I write because I hope in God's regard for us, for me. Perhaps God reads my meditations, and by reading is summoned to respond, to speak, to act, to renew all who are remembered in our church, in our worship, in our body at prayer.

After my walk, writing becomes another prayer, a kind of contemplation, words of gratitude for the life of God that flows into me through God's people as they share their lives, as they manifest God's presence, and as they protest against the absence of God's redemption. I write because I hope in God's regard for us, for me; because I hope that God attends to our protests against God's silence, against the silence that swallows the words and breath that express our need for healing and comfort, for peace; because, perhaps, God reads my meditations, and by reading is summoned to respond: to speak, to act, to renew all who are remembered in our church, in our worship, in our body at prayer.[14]

Notes

[1] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 76. Henri de Lubac also reads the apostle Paul as describing the ineffable union between the church and God: "For St. Paul . . . it is Christ who appears . . . as a center, an atmosphere, a whole world even, in which man and God, man and man, are in communion and achieve union. For it is 'he who fills all in all.'" Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 45.

[2] Menno Simons, "Brief Confession on the Incarnation" (1544), in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 448.

[3] See Herbert McCabe's essay "Prayer," in *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 1987): 215–25. "For us to pray is to be taken over, possessed by the Holy Spirit which is the life of love between Father and Son" (220).

[4] Ibid.

[5] "To be able to hope is to be awake, to be watchful, to be awakened from sleep. Christian worship is not a pastime or an interlude from pain. It is, rather, a pedagogy of watchfulness, a disciplining of attention, an education in attentive reverence for God and for the features of his world." Nicholas Lash, *Seeing in the Dark: University Sermons* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), 30–31.

[6] Blaise Pascal, *The Mystery of Jesus*, no. 919, in *Pensees*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 289; Colossians 1:24. "To understand Calvary as the place where *God* died is to understand all other places of death as Calvary," writes Nicholas Lash in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 214. Cf. Donald M. MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, ed. George W. Roberts and Donovan E. Smucker (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1968), 96.

[7] Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 74.

[8] Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God*, trans. Joyce L. Irwin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 78.

[9] Communion is both an affirmation of a way of life and a sign of our discontent, the gift of another world in the midst of this world; to borrow the words of an eminent political theorist, Communion is among our "hopeful signs of discontent." Sheldon S. Wolin, "Revolutionary Action Today," in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University, 1985), 256.

[10] 1 Corinthians 11:26; NRSV.

[11] Romans 4:17; NRSV.

[12] Sebastian Moore, *The Contagion of Jesus: Doing Theology As If It Mattered*, ed. Stephen McCarthy (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 23.

[13] Psalm 109:1; NRSV.

[14] I'm grateful to the people who allowed me to include their prayers in my essay. I'm indebted to several readers from church who offered criticisms and suggestions: Melissa Florer-Bixler, Ryan Koch, Scott Schomburg, and Katie Villegas.

About the author

Isaac Villegas is pastor of Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship in North Carolina.