

Prayer and action

Personal reflections

Duane Shank

In May 1944 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter on the occasion of the baptism of his friend Eberhard Bethge's son (Bonhoeffer's grandnephew). In this letter, smuggled out of prison,¹ Bonhoeffer notes that "your birth provides us with a suitable occasion to reflect on the changes that time brings, and to try to scan the outlines of the future." After recounting the situation in which the German church found itself, he noted,

We are once again being driven right back to the beginnings of our understanding. Reconciliation and redemption, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love of our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship—all these things are so difficult and so remote that we hardly venture any more to speak of them. In the traditional words and acts we suspect that there may be something quite new and revolutionary, though we cannot as yet grasp or express it. That is our own fault. Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to [humanity] and the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christian today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action.... All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of this prayer and action."²

Those words have become a motto for me. In my life as a political strategist, activist, and organizer, I have attempted to live a life of righteous action and am increasingly sustained by a life of prayer. And I increasingly believe that that the action is difficult, if not impossible, without the prayer.

Partners with God

This conviction is based on a fundamental grounding of my faith and spirituality. I believe that our calling is to become partners with God in changing the world, in bringing the world closer to its final redemption in the reign of God. This belief is expressed by Abraham Joshua Heschel in *God in Search of Man*:

*This is the mysterious paradox of Biblical faith: God is pursuing man. It is as if God were unwilling to be alone, and He had chosen man to serve Him. Our seeking him is not only man's but also His concern, and must not be considered an exclusively human affair. His will is involved in our yearnings. All of human history as described in the Bible may be summarized in one phase: God is in search of man.*³

I believe that the work I do is God's work, and that I work with God in bringing the kingdom of God closer on earth. And that through prayer, I can talk with God and listen to God as I seek strength, wisdom, and guidance in that work.

But that prayer is integrally coupled with action. Walter Wink describes the interaction between the two:

We have all known Christians for whom prayer is a substitute for action, who dump on God the responsibility for doing what God's groaning in us is seeking to impel us to do. But action is also no substitute for prayer. For some, action is a cover for unbelief; they simply do not believe that God is able to act in the world. Since God cannot change things, we must. For others, who feel called by God to establish justice, prayer seems a waste of precious time. But long-term struggle requires constant inner renewal, else the wells of love run dry. Social action without prayer is soulless; but prayer without action lacks integrity."⁴

A daily prayer

Inside my office door at Sojourners is a ceramic mezuzah (a small case traditionally affixed to the doorpost of a Jewish family's home, containing a scroll inscribed with the Shema).⁵ My mezuzah includes Mark 12:29-30,⁶ a text where Jesus adds Leviticus 19:18

to his recitation of the Shema. As I walk into the office each morning, I stop and recite: “The LORD is God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

This recital is first an affirmation that only one is God—that there is one to whom all commitment and loyalty are owed. This confession is the root of the fight against idolatry, whether in ancient Israel, in Jesus’ time, or in ours. Today the false gods

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challenged in the Hebrew scriptures go by the names of militarism, racism, and nationalism, but the challenge is the same. To what do we owe our ultimate, deepest loyalty?

This teaching is important these days. Our nation’s leaders demand our loyalty: you’re either with us or against us; it’s good against evil. To which we respond, “The LORD is God, the LORD alone.” It is our pledge of allegiance, our statement of intent to obey God’s instructions. This proclamation is linked to the kingship—the kingdom—of God. If one

acknowledges God and affirms that there is no other God, one is accepting God’s kingdom and the terms of that kingdom. This daily prayer is an important reminder for one involved in political action that no cause, no movement, no ideology, no party, or no candidate can command the loyalty we owe to God and God alone.

A prayer service for peace

As the crisis leading toward war with Iraq was building, Sojourners decided in early January 2003 to hold a prayer service for peace at the Washington National Cathedral on Martin Luther King Day, January 20. A four-mile procession to the White House would follow our worship.

We had three weeks to organize the event. I led a staff team that worked with cathedral staff to plan the service, do the necessary outreach and publicity, secure participation from church leaders and prominent speakers, get the needed police permits for the march, and attend to a host of other details. The morning of

the event, after a short meeting in the bishop's office to go over the last details, we were ready to go the few hundred yards to the cathedral to begin the service.

I noticed a small chapel next to the office and decided to spend a few minutes there. Kneeling before the altar, I prayed: "Lord, I've done all I can do. I've tried to cover every detail. Now it's up to you. I leave it in your hands. May this service and this day be a witness to your call to peacemaking."

As I entered the cathedral, I saw a standing-room-only crowd of 3,500 people. The service was powerful and inspiring, and the procession smooth and moving. Our prayer and procession was a powerful way to express opposition to the coming war and provided a sharp contrast to the harsh political rhetoric that dominated other actions that weekend.

A prayer vigil on Capitol Hill

Throughout 2005, we had been working on a "Budgets Are Moral Documents" campaign, challenging proposed cuts in services—food stamps, Medicaid, student loans, etc.—to those in poverty. The congressional debate came down to the week before Christmas, with climactic votes scheduled in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Several weeks earlier, we had begun planning a prayer vigil to be held at a House office building, to dramatize the voices of those who were shut out of the debate and to say that it was time for a moral resistance to an immoral federal budget. On Tuesday evening, December 13, some 300 people gathered in a Capitol Hill church for singing, powerful preaching, and prayer seeking God's guidance in the next day's action. Wednesday morning, after a period of nonviolence training and extended prayers, we walked to the Cannon House Office Building. After a short service with more preaching and prayer, 115 people knelt or sat on the steps leading to the building entrance. After the required warnings, Capitol police began arresting folks one-by-one, while those remaining continued singing and praying. In the words of one participant,

The greatest blessing for me came in the form of a gift that I did not expect. I did not anticipate the level of spiritual power that I experienced. I had never participated in

direct civil disobedience before last Wednesday. As the day approached, my mind was filled with wondering about what would happen and how I would react. When the time came to kneel in prayer on the steps of the Cannon Office Building, there was a sense of peace and community that made me feel at home. This form of embodied faith took me to a new level of advocacy for others and personal commitment to justice. Being in the presence of so many other sisters and brothers in Christ taught me a real lesson in the power of Christian community. The love and support shared by those on the steps and those surrounding us gave me a sense of peace and well-being that left no room for the fear that I expected to arise within me. The whole experience of being arrested and processed felt more like a day of spiritual renewal than a day of bearing the consequences of our illegal activity.

Another wrote,

No matter what the final outcomes in Congress, our time in prayer was worthwhile and effective. We definitely moved hearts.... As one who volunteers regularly with the poor, and one who is actively pursuing a career in social work and advocacy, I am deeply grateful for the fellowship and inspiration provided to me this past week. Our time together gave me increased courage, a renewed sense of purpose, and a lightness in my heart as I am reminded of the love, the hope, and the joy I know.

Sojourners

Sojourners is known as an activist organization, but everything we do is immersed in prayer. We have a monthly chapel service, every day at noon a small group gathers to pray, and many staff meetings open with prayer. I convene a weekly meeting of our policy, organizing, and media staff to discuss the issues and campaigns we're working on and to coordinate that work. We begin with prayer asking God for guidance and wisdom as we discuss the issues—from the federal budget to Iraq, Darfur to the minimum wage—and discern what our response should be and how we

should go about making it. In Abraham Joshua Heschel's words, "Prayer is a perspective from which to behold, from which to respond to, the challenges we face. Man in prayer does not seek to impose his will on God; he seeks to impose God's will and mercy upon himself."⁷

I pray because I recognize my human weakness and my need for the grace of God in order to carry on. There are days when cynicism and depression about the state of the world begin to raise their heads: why do I continue to do political work when all around it seems so hopeless? On those occasions, my prayer is often the words of Thomas Dorsey's famous song:

*Precious Lord, take my hand,
lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night,
lead me on to the light,
take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*⁸

And I find strength in these words from Hebrews 4:16: "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." I seek to approach God with boldness, to pour out my heart and soul, my stress and struggle, my reluctance to let go. And to trust and believe that when I do so, I will receive mercy and find grace.

And in that grace I find the strength to carry on, to work with God to bring God's reign closer to reality.

Notes

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5, 1943, and imprisoned in Berlin. After a failed attempt on Hitler's life (July 20, 1944), documents were found that linked Bonhoeffer with the conspiracy, and he was executed on April 9, 1945.

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge," in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 299–300. Emphasis added.

³Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 136.

⁴Walter Wink, "Prayer and the Powers," chapter 16 in *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 306.

⁵"Hear O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart" (Deut. 6:4-5).

⁶“The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

⁷Abraham Joshua Heschel, “On Prayer,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1996), 259.

⁸Thomas A. Dorsey, 1932; no. 576 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

About the author

Duane Shank is Senior Policy Advisor for Sojourners/Call to Renewal. He has been involved in peace and justice work for thirty-five years as a community organizer in the rural south, in interfaith coalitions, in the nuclear weapons freeze, and in Central America solidarity movements of the 1980s. A Mennonite, Duane is a member of the Community of Christ ecumenical congregation in Washington, DC.