

Paralysis, Exasperation, and Helplessness as Prayer.



Several years ago I received an email that literally stopped my breath. A man who had been for many years an intellectual and faith mentor to me, a man whom I thoroughly trusted, and a man with whom I had developed a life-giving friendship, had killed both his wife and himself in a murder-suicide. The news left me gasping for air, paralyzed in terms of how to understand and accept this as well as how to pray in the face of this.

I had neither words of explanation nor words for prayer. My heart and my head were like two water pumps working a dry well, useless and frustrated. Whatever consolation I had was drawn from an assurance from persons who knew him more intimately that there had been major signs of mental deterioration in the time leading up to this horrible event and they were morally certain that this was the result of an organic dysfunction in his brain, not an indication of his person. Yet ... how does one pray in a situation like this? There aren't any words.

And we have all experienced situations like this: the tragic death of someone we love by murder, suicide, overdose, or accident. Or, the exasperation and helplessness we feel in the face of the many seemingly senseless events we see daily in our world: Terrorists killing thousands of innocent people; natural disasters leaving countless persons dead or homeless; mass killings by deranged individuals in New York, Paris, Las Vegas, Florida, San Bernardino, Sandy Hook, among other places; and millions of refugees having to flee their homelands because of war or poverty. And we all we know people who have received terminal sentences in medical clinics and had to face what seems as an unfair death: young children whose lives are just starting and who shouldn't be asked at so tender an age to have to process mortality and young mothers dying whose children still desperately need them.

In the face of these things, we aren't just exasperated by the senselessness of the situation we struggle too to find both heart and words with which to pray. How do we pray when we are paralyzed by senselessness and tragedy? How do we pray when we no longer have the heart for it?

St. Paul tells us that when we don't know how to pray, the Spirit in groans too deep for words prays through us. What an extraordinary text! Paul tells us that when we can still find the words with which to pray this is not our deepest prayer. Likewise when we still have the heart to pray, this too is not our deepest prayer. Our deepest prayer is when we are rendered mute and groaning in exasperation, in frustration, in helplessness. Wordless exasperation is often our deepest prayer. We pray most deeply when we are so driven to our knees so as to be unable to do anything except surrender to helplessness. Our groaning, wordless, seemingly the antithesis of prayer, is indeed our prayer. It is the Spirit praying through us. How so?

The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is, as scripture assures us, the spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, longsuffering, fidelity, mildness, faith, and chastity. And that Spirit lives deep within us, placed there by God in our very make-up and put into us even more deeply by our baptism. When we are exasperated and driven to our knees by a tragedy which is too painful and senseless to accept and absorb our groans of helplessness are in fact the Spirit of God groaning in us, suffering all that it isn't, yearning for goodness, beseeching God in a language beyond words.

Sometimes we can find the heart and the words with which to pray, but there are other times when, in the words of the Book of Lamentation, all we can do is put our mouths to the dust and wait. The poet, Rainer Marie Rilke, once gave this advice to a person who had written him, lamenting that in the face of a devastating loss he was so paralyzed that he did not know what he could possibly do with the pain he was experiencing. Rilke's advice: Give that heaviness back to the earth itself, the earth is heavy, mountains are heavy, the seas are heavy. In effect: Let your groaning be your prayer!

When we don't know how to pray, the Spirit in groans too deep for words prays through us. So every time we are face-to-face with a tragic situation that leaves us stuttering, mute, and so without heart that all we can do is say, I can't explain this! I can't accept this! I can't deal with this! This is senseless! I am paralyzed in my emotions! I am paralyzed in my faith! I no longer have the heart to pray, it can be consoling to know that this paralyzing exasperation is our prayer – and perhaps the deepest and most sincere prayer we have ever offered.

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