

Thoughts and prayers, hand-wringing, and faithlessness

By [James Sledge](#)

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I posted my own brief prayer on Facebook Sunday after learning of the shooting in Orlando, and I've shared a few posts from others that moved or touched me. But I confess that I'm a bit tired of well-crafted prayers proliferating on my social media pages. At some point it starts to feel like a prayer competition. No doubt most of these prayers are heartfelt and helpful to many, but I've seen so many of them in recent years.

At the same time that thoughts and prayers have begun to grate on me, I am far beyond that with American society. I grew up in "the country" and learned to shoot and hunt, but no hunter needs a military assault rifle. And in this supposedly Christian nation, people quote the Second Amendment as though it were sacred writ. But it's only an amendment to a constitution that has needed correction many times over its slightly more two centuries of existence.

This document that is held sacred originally approved of slavery, denied women the vote, and didn't allow the people to elect the senators from their state. Yet many, including many who say they are Christian, quote "the right to bear arms" as though it was to be found in the Ten Commandments. They insist on "my rights" while ignoring Jesus' command to deny oneself and to put the need of the other, even of the enemy, above oneself.

I wonder what Jesus thinks of the odd mix of "thoughts and prayers" combined with the near certainty that no meaningful measures to curb gun violence will be enacted, that rights matter more than people's lives. This is what he said to his followers over their failure to heal someone in desperate need: "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?" What must he think of us?

But I'm not just annoyed and frustrated with other Christians. I feel certain Jesus includes me among the perverse. When the disciples ask Jesus why they had been unable to heal the person he answers, "Because of your little faith. For truly I tell

you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."

Sometimes I feel like I belong to the Church of the Holy Hand-Wringing. We can drone on and on, making endless statements about the need for this measure or that. We are well-versed in passing resolutions that almost no one pays any attention to, but we're not much on telling mountains to move. We're far too rational and timid ever to say, "In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you ... " I'm far too rational and timid.

In the New Testament letter of James, there are these words on faith. "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead." I fear that my own "thoughts and prayers" are a version of "Go in peace ... "

I am not at all certain how to ratchet up my faith so that it is alive. Perhaps I suffer from the same affliction I've often diagnosed as ailing my and other mainline denominations. I know a lot about God, but I do not really know God in a deep and meaningful way. I do not experience God's presence significantly enough to trust God's ways and God's power over the ways and power I know from living in the world.

While I'm uncertain about specifics, clearly I need to work on experiencing God, on letting the Spirit touch me and guide me. A hurting world needs something more tangible and alive than my thoughts and prayers.

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