

Prayer instead of fear

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This election season, we've seen a lot of hatred and inhospitality directed toward Muslims and toward migrants. There is talk of building walls instead of bridges, a focus on fueling the politics of fear instead of concern for human need.

In 1 Kings 8 we see an alternative. Solomon, a political leader, dedicates the Temple in prayer--and as part of this, he remembers the foreigner, the outsider, the religious other. He does not seek to stir people's fears and insecurities about the future. Rather, he intercedes on behalf of those who will pilgrim to Jerusalem to bring their prayers before YHWH, the God of Israel.

A key difference here lies in the genre: prayer is quite different from a political speech or debate. In prayer, even the king realizes that he is not ultimately in control. This is evident in Solomon's posture: he "stood before the altar of the LORD." Later he is portrayed as kneeling. Furthermore, Solomon repeatedly acknowledges the power, might, glory, and great name of God. Such humility in prayer counters the narcissism of contemporary political discourse.

It is intriguing that Solomon urges God to "do according to all that the foreigner calls to you." He puts no qualifications on the prayers of those foreigners, no limitations or restrictions on the pleas of those ones who are not part of the people of Israel. One might argue his intercession seeks to hegemonize the foreigner under the religious conviction of Yahwism--a point supported by his portrayal of the foreigner as one who "knows" and "fears" the name of YHWH.

But in Solomon's prayer, the foreigner is not forced to pray or pilgrim in Jerusalem. The foreigner has agency and chooses to pray to YHWH. Isaiah 56:6-8 speaks as well of foreigners joining into the covenant of YHWH with Israel. This openness toward the needs of the other is not captive to fear or jealousy, and it is not meant to take control of the other. It treats the other as a subject whose needs and pleas matter to the community of faith.

When we pray on behalf of those who are targeted by bigotry and exclusion, we empathize with them--and we realize that the task is bigger than ourselves. When we urge God to listen to their prayers, we commit ourselves to a posture of trust as they exercise their own agency in prayers and pleas for justice.